

SHAHEEN BAGH

FROM A PROTEST
TO A MOVEMENT

ZIYA US SALAM • UZMA AUSAF



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B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW DELHI • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY INDIA
Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd
Second Floor, LSC Building No. 4, DDA Complex, Pocket C – 6 & 7,
Vasant Kunj New Delhi 110070

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This edition published in 2020

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ISBN: PB: 978-9-3900-7792-2; eBook: 978-9-3900-7794-6

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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Dear Daughters,

All these years that you have walked on this earth, we have tried to inculcate in you feelings of unabashed pride and unflinching loyalty towards our nation. When you were all younger, you would recall your parents getting you ready for Independence Day or Republic Day celebrations in your school with as much, or maybe greater, joy as Eid celebrations. To see you hop, run and skip your way to school with a tricolour in your hand, a tricolour cap on your head and ribbons around your wrist brought a glint to our eyes. Now, dear daughters, is the time to stand up for the same tricolour. Speak up. Staying quiet today amounts to disrespecting the tricolour, the national anthem and all the shared values of equality, liberty and fraternity that our beloved Constitution has instilled in us.

Just as there are times to stay calm and let the storm pass, there are times when you have to take up the challenge head on. That time is now, when the idea of India is in danger. It is heart-warming to see you all occasionally join the Shaheen Bagh women, and all other protestors, defiant in the face of danger. But it is not enough. If we have to answer posterity, you must do so too. This is the moment when we must all close ranks and count as one. Persevere, persist. Be relentless in the pursuit of justice. Allah is Adil, the One who does justice. He loves those who do justice. So, stand in solidarity with those who are opposing the injustices sought to be inflicted in the name of discriminatory laws like the CAA, NPR and NRC.

Be afraid not of the bullet that kills. Be afraid of timidity or prejudice dressed up as neutrality. Stay strong. The struggle might be arduous but we shall overcome, Insha Allah. Tomorrow beckons us all.

This book is for you Maryam, Aliza, Juveria and Mishal; be like the Shaheen Bagh women.

Yours lovingly,

Ammi
Baba

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PREFACE

We live in the age of constant vilification of the other, of muzzling speech and equating dissent with treachery. The worst though is an organised campaign equating criticism of the government with the criticism of the nation, akin to being a traitor. There is no depth too low to sink, no words too slanderous, no character assassination too immoral when it comes to tackling the opponents. The exemplary Shaheen Bagh women—steadfast, resolute, united and almost unbelievable peaceniks—have experienced the worst, and lived to tell the tale. With their incredible powers of patience and abiding belief in ahimsa, they turned a protest into a satyagraha, even a movement.

It started one bleak December evening. The students of Jamia Millia Islamia University had been subjected to the worst brutality ever to visit a university campus in Delhi in recent years. Not just students who had been protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) but those studying in the university library or praying in the mosque were at the receiving end of police fury. The police, allegedly hurling the most communal of abuses at the students, used tear gas in the library, leaving hundreds suffocating. Tables and chairs were smashed, window panes reduced to shards, bones were broken—a student even lost his eye. There were visuals of blood on the prayer carpets in the mosque. The most abiding image though was of four Jamia girls shielding a male student from the collective blows of police personnel who had dragged him out of the house by his collar. Even as two girls physically shielded the guy from the blows of the policemen, two other girls looked the policemen in the eye, fearlessly, fiercely. The hijab-wearing girls flinched not a second, compelling the cops to retreat. The girls were later identified as Ayesha Renna and Ladeeda Sakhaloon; the guy whose life they saved was Shaheen—he escaped with a bleeding nose and a fractured arm. The image summed up how the women were going to respond to any atrocity in the anti-CAA stir. It tore to pieces many an image of coy, speechless and powerless Muslim women.

Even as images of blood in the mosque and a boy with a bandaged eye caused consternation among the locals, the stir spread to the most unimaginable of places—Shaheen Bagh. Beyond people in the vicinity, not many were aware of its whereabouts. The largely working-class neighbourhood with its fair sprinkling of the wealthy and well educated was to soon become the epicentre of the struggle against the CAA, National Register of Citizens (NRC), and a bit later, the National Population Register (NPR). Men and women, the young and the old, used Google Maps to find their way through to Shaheen Bagh. Not just the Indian media and local politicians, the media across the world took note of a protest led by Muslim women taking on the Hindutva-espousing government.

A piece in *The Washington Post* stated:

As the temperature in India's capital plunged on a recent evening, Rehana Khatun bundled her 29-day-old daughter in a fuzzy quilt and went out for her new nightly activity: participating in a sit-in against the government. Khatun, 28, is a mother of three who rarely leaves her neighbourhood in southeast Delhi. She is one of a few hundred Muslim women—including grandmothers and children—who have occupied a stretch of road for a month, undeterred by rain, cold or threats, as a sign of opposition to a new law that excludes Muslim migrants from a fast track to citizenship.

She sits cross-legged as she settles in for another night of speeches under bright blue and yellow tarps held up by narrow poles. 'Our fight is for our Constitution, our country, our survival', she said.

The protest in the capital's Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood has become an enduring symbol of the demonstrations that have swept India over the new law, which was passed in December. Most of the women are homemakers, many in hijabs, and their long-running vigil has been featured on prime-time news shows, inspired similar sit-ins and attracted solidarity from across India. On Sunday, the protest attracted its largest crowd yet, according to locals, as thousands of supporters packed the narrow lanes surrounding the area.¹

Against all odds, the resolute women of Shaheen Bagh gave the nation hope. Inspired by the intrepid girls in Jamia, the weather-beaten, wizened women of Shaheen Bagh took to the streets, concerned as they were for the safety of their grandchildren studying in the university. Most hailed from families that had either not allowed these women to study when they were young or could not afford to provide them education. Now, in the autumn of

their life, these women saw education as an opportunity for upward mobility in life. For years, they had emphasised good education for their children. When their children or grandchildren went to study in Jamia, they took pride in it. Also, there was unexpressed safety; they knew the youngsters had gone virtually next door to study as the university was less than two kilometres away from their homes. Jamia offered them hope for a better future, and the reality of a secure and stable today. They could reasonably expect them to reach home safely after their classes. The policemen on the rampage in the university on 15 December 2019 shattered many such innocent dreams. The Shaheen Bagh women could no longer keep quiet. The men in uniform had entered the campus, indulged in violence in the library; they had not even spared the mosque. ‘The testimonies from those present in Jamia suggest that the police targeted individuals indiscriminately, even entering the mosque on campus and hurting a local cleric’², *India Today* later reported. No place was deemed safe. Pushed to the wall in this battle for survival, the Shaheen Bagh women came out; first only a handful, then hundreds, at times even thousands. It was to define not just the way protests shaped up against the new divisive and discriminatory law, but how the nation looked at women in general, and Muslim women in particular.

It reminded many old-timers of the scenes in Old Delhi during the time of the Emergency when women came out of their homes to form a human shield around Turkman Gate against the bulldozers sent to demolish their houses. Or when they came out of Dojana House near Jama Masjid in Old Delhi and hid their husbands, sons and brothers from activists allegedly rounding up men for coercive vasectomy. Brave as those actions were, they were consigned to the inner recesses of the mind in the relentless momentum of time. Only a handful like Shabbeeran, one of the grandmothers at the Shaheen Bagh protest, remembered.

The protest started after the Jamia violence, where the students had been protesting against the CAA. The women took the onus on themselves. They could not leave their children to fight this battle alone; the mothers in them rebelled against the thought of staying at home, or merely offering their prayers five times a day. God does not change the condition of people until they themselves make an effort, many reminded themselves. They stepped

out, and for the first time in their life, occupied a public space, Road 13A, which links Mathura Road in Delhi with Noida. The arterial road is much used by commuters from Noida, Delhi and Faridabad. The women had never been a part of any public protest, no rally, no march, no dharna, nothing. They were the unsung homemakers whose area of operation was confined to home and hearth. They were adept at keeping everything in order at home so that the menfolk could go out, study and earn a living. Many claimed they had not even been down to the local grocer in their life. Or seen the insides of a mosque down the lane. Yet, here they were, stepping out of their comfort zone, raising their voice against the CAA, reaching out to larger society, demolishing walls, building bridges, discovering a voice they probably never thought they had. They came out to sit in a dharna first on the evening of 15 December 2019. In less than a week, the spotlight shifted from Jamia, Jantar Mantar, Jama Masjid, India Gate, all important protest sites in the struggle against CAA, to the hitherto little-known dirt-laden lanes of Shaheen Bagh. To be in Shaheen Bagh was something else. It was magical; it was exhilarating. It was like watching the triumph of the human spirit, the victory of fortitude against adversity. Soon, it became a pilgrimage centre of secular India harping on the notions of a shared past. Muslim women were shortly joined by Hindu sisters; some came in from colonies like Lajpat Nagar and Sarita Vihar, others joined gradually from neighbouring cities like Chandigarh, Jaipur and Ghaziabad. A little later, a formidable Sikh contingent arrived as reinforcement. Then a delegation of Christian nuns came in, giving Shaheen Bagh the look of a miniature India. Some came from Kerala, some from Chhattisgarh, some from Punjab, and the women of Shaheen Bagh accommodated them all. And the protest began showing signs of a movement.

As said to the co-author Ziya Us Salam by the illustrious historian Romila Thapar, who visited Shaheen Bagh after the women had been sitting in protest for eight weeks came back with this impression:



Illustrious historian Romila Thapar at Shaheen Bagh.

Women are finding their voice through Shaheen Bagh. We know all the struggles that women have had to go through in this country over the past fifty years. One of the manifestations of the success of that struggle is Shaheen Bagh. The struggle is led by some Muslim women, the kind who are never in the limelight, never given any publicity, and who are dismissed as just housewives. They are asserting their personality, and airing an opinion that is important. It is all very, very impressive. Nobody would have thought such strong resistance to emanate from such a quarter. The unexpectedness of it all has only added to a feeling of exhilaration. At the same time, it is the

subterranean self that people do not express regularly but when they are pushed to the wall, they react. Shaheen Bagh is not about the CAA any longer, it is an assertion of a different, much more fundamental strength.

Indeed, it was an assertion of a different kind. Though technically against the CAA–NPR–NRC trilogy, it was actually a cry of anguish against all the wrongs inflicted on the community and on the women. And Muslim women, often erroneously regarded as timid sex bags, hit back at such notions. Many women, in personal conversations, elucidated the reasons for protest. ‘We kept quiet when the Supreme Court said the demolition of Babri Masjid was wrong but still gave the site of the mosque to the attackers. We kept our counsel when the government claimed it had freed Muslim women from the danger of triple talaq but formed a law without consulting Muslim women. We kept quiet when they [criminals allegedly belonging to Gau Raksha Samitis] lynched our men in the name of cow protection. But now with CAA, NRC and NPR, it was a question of our fundamental existence. When they are beginning to question our right to be called an Indian, what is the point of any property, any bank balance? We know what happened in Assam. We know what our home minister said again and again, explaining the chronology. We were nervous, we were edgy with all the aggressive sloganeering going on. Then they hit our children. At that time, we said, this much and no further. We went door to door, called each other out knowing if we do not raise our voice today, we would be silenced forever. The choice was simple: Either sit at the protest today or prepare to sit in a detention centre a few years later,’ said Saima Siddiqui on 12 January 2020, the day the protest registered the highest footfall with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 150,000. It was a Sunday and unconfirmed word had spread that a delegation of United Nations’ officials was visiting the protest site in the evening. Not just the rectangular piece of land where the women sat, but every lane and bylane leading to it was choc-a-bloc with human traffic. Forget parking a car or even manoeuvring a motorbike across to the protest site, all roads leading to it were teeming with people, so much so it became impossible to even take out a mobile phone from one’s pocket in case anybody called. People stood toe to toe, shoulder to shoulder. The locals, keen to send across food to the protestors, had to wait till past midnight to reach them! On 12 January 2020, it seemed

everybody wanted to be at Shaheen Bagh. Yet, in this crowd, there was order, discipline and chivalry. The men, standing on two sides of the road, formed a human chain near the protest site, enabling the women to pass safely without the fear of being inappropriately touched. In fact, there was not a single case of a woman protestor alleging indecent advance from a man in two months.

Amrit Dhillon paid a tribute in *The Citizen*:

Visit Shaheen Bagh not just to support the women and their heroism, which goes without saying, but to celebrate the good side of that much scorned and reviled creature, the Indian man. Rarely do you see a large crowd of Indian men which is good natured, smiling, relaxed, civil, and totally lacking in aggression or a roughness of look or manner towards the women around them but that is the nature of the crowd there.

Sunday's gathering was the biggest so far with the massed crowd stretching as far as the eye could see. The women sat on the ground in their usual place in the centre of the spot. All around them, on four sides was a phalanx of standing men up to 20 or 30 deep. We were two unaccompanied women trying to reach the centre. It could have been a daunting proposition to make our way through the dense crowd but how different it turned out to be.

Men made way for us as we tried to push through to the centre. Those at the front who didn't realise we were trying to get through, were urged by others to move aside. We were tightly packed inside this crowd, our bodies touching others, but not for a moment did we feel uncomfortable. Hands emerged to help us over the barricade around the stage. Apart from the ordinary men there to support the cause, the volunteers were superb, making sure order was maintained and keeping an eagle eye on the crowd in case someone was in difficulty or lest a skirmish break out to ruin the peaceful atmosphere. The sense of responsibility in these young men was uplifting.³

It all started with two IITians, Aasif Mujtaba and Sharjeel Imam, supporting and guiding the women; the latter dissociated himself after the first two weeks. With help from other men, notably Aftab Ahmad, Firoz Iqbal Khan, Abid Sheikh, Khursheed and Aasif Toofani along with mostly students from Jamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), they blocked the much-used road that had not been stopped in living memory. They knew protesting at Jantar Mantar, the usual site of protestors, would not get any attention, blocking a frequently-used road would. Concrete slabs and police

barricades were used to stop the traffic. While men took care of the initial infrastructural support, the women sat on the road. They sat, sat and sat some more. Whether it rained, or there was a hailstorm, or even when Delhi registered its coldest night in 120 years, the women refused to move, as if their life depended on it; and it probably did. They protested peacefully, persistently and persuasively, asking the government to repeal the CAA. When the protest started, many did not know the full form of the term, but they understood it was meant to give citizenship to everybody except Muslims. As Shaheen Bagh is a predominantly Muslim locality, the women read it as a collective insult, and pledged not to move back. Here was a government openly making laws that went against the values of equality that our Constitution stands for, they thought. Yet, like wise grandmothers at home, they told the young men taking care of the elementary requirements of a struggle, the men managing the barricades, the men arranging for a pandal, the men arranging for their food and water, that violence is not an option. Not to forget those who made the first placards, those who explained to the unlettered women the chronology Home Minister Amit Shah referred to repeatedly—how a non-Muslim who does not find his name in NRC can hope to get on the rolls through CAA, but a Muslim who misses out can be thrown into a detention centre, the kind which had sprung up in Assam. The NPR, the women were reminded, was the first step towards NRC, as the home minister had said. The home minister and the prime minister both later clarified that the CAA had nothing to do with Indian Muslims. And there was no discussion in the cabinet on NRC. The message failed to percolate down to everybody; many did not believe them.

The women gave vent to their pent-up anger. For the first time, they sought equality as citizens of the country, equality as a community, equality as the gender. They were unapologetic about their identity as Muslims or as women. The fight that started with the CAA soon took other forms as women, forever denied their space in public discourse, found in the Shaheen Bagh protest a kind of gratification, even salvation that life had denied them otherwise. Along the way, they turned many presumptions, a hundred stereotypes in their head. Muslim women were not as browbeaten as many assumed, not as voiceless as many alleged. They had a mind of

their own, and should the need arise, they could be stronger than men. Eight weeks into the stir, *India Today* observed:

Shaheen Bagh has put paid to the pervasive and incorrect belief that holds the average Indian Muslim woman to be, as social media influencer Sania Ahmad puts it, an uneducated and burqa-clad figure who has no voice or rights, is oppressed by cruel, sex-hungry men, and stays home and makes babies.

Far from it—as the anti-government protesters in south-eastern Delhi have proved. Their historic, continuous demonstration is the centrepiece of the movement, and their identity as Muslims—Indian Muslims—is on proud display as perhaps never before, including in art and graffiti. Faced with television cameras and microphones, they are knowledgeable, confident and eloquent. More than fifty days in, their resolve appears not to have flagged.⁴

The women prayed where they protested. They fasted on the eve of a Supreme Court hearing of the anti-CAA petitions. They even sang songs of resistance penned by Muhammad Iqbal, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Habib Jalib, all Pakistani poets. They sent out a strong message as much with their songs as the choice of poets; the Shaheen Bagh women will do the things their way. Accept it or leave it.

The women gave a uniquely feminine touch to the protest. Covered with layers of woollens, they brought along rugs and blankets to ward off the cold. With women there, multitasking could not be far away. Some of them got knitting needles and wool to make mufflers and sweaters. Again, instead of being shy about it, they announced it from the microphone and invited people to bring wool if they wanted a muffler or a sweater knit. With the protestors came little children. Unable to afford a maid or a crèche, many brought along their new-born babies. One four-month-old child, unfortunately, could not bear the biting cold of Delhi, and paid with his life. His mother remained undaunted, and was back at the protest on the fourth day of his death. Others sent their children to school in the morning and brought them there in the evening. Even as the mothers raised slogans or sang songs of defiance and patriotism, they took time out to help the children with their homework. It was the first public spectacle of a protest where children were seen in good numbers.

Talking of children, it is here that the protest got a completely feminine, even motherly, touch. Realising that children need to be kept busy, the

Shaheen Bagh women organised drawing competitions. The children were provided pencils, crayons and paper, and asked to draw, colour or sketch. Their works were put on display at the foot overbridge. They were provided with a makeshift library at the bus stop, where, for an hour every afternoon, textbooks were provided for free reading. Later in the day, some fantasy tales and books of rhymes kept the children busy. For those too old for rhymes and too young to go to college, there were books on the founding fathers of the nation—biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Talk of imparting the right values! Some protestors, teachers by profession, even took time out to help the children with maths and science!

Amidst all this, the women pledged to uphold the Constitution, promised not to show their papers in case of NPR, latching on to the words of lyricist Varun Grover: ‘Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge’ (We will not show the papers). They sang ‘Hum Dekhenge’ (We will see) and ‘Dastoor’(Tradition) fearlessly, and often tunefully, unperturbed by the fact that both were Pakistani poets, and they were singing the nazms (poems) at a time when anybody who opposed Prime Minister Narendra Modi was advised to go to Pakistan by some of his party colleagues. The Shaheen Bagh women remained impervious to taunts. When a ruling party leader accused them of sitting in protest for a plate of biryani and ₹500, they hit back with a formal complaint through their lawyer. During the election to the State Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) in Delhi, when the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) leader Amit Shah asked the electorate to press the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) button so hard that current passes through Shaheen Bagh⁵, they still refused to say a word in anger. Ignoring hate and abuse, they still talked of inclusion and revived the slogan ‘Hindu–Muslim–Sikh–Isai, aapas mein hain bhai-bhai’ (Hindus–Muslims–Sikhs–Christians are brothers). On 11 February 2020, the day the Delhi Assembly election results were declared, the women observed a silent fast, a maun vrat, refusing to be drawn into the slugfest of politics. Their fight was for the Constitution, not in favour of or against a political party; they reminded us through placards, even as they kept their mouths taped or closed with a black cloth.

These were the women who had transformed Shaheen Bagh, giving the stir the colour of a celebration of the idea of India. Right near where the

women sat, there came up a metallic map of India with the message ‘No CAA, no NPR, no NRC’. At night, the map glowed with light. Then there was a replica of India Gate; this time with the names of those who had died fighting against the CAA written on each brick. Not too far was a miniature detention centre to remind the visitors what awaited them in case they failed to oppose the new trilogy. Of course, there was plenty of graffiti with inspiring slogans and a frank declaration: Revolution has begun. All around the premises, there were tricolours. In fact, so conspicuous and so integral a part of their movement was the tricolour that the women seemed to have retrieved the national flag from those who had often used it as a divisive tool, supporting the alleged rapists or rioters in Kathua, Unnao, Kasganj and other places. Or as a weapon to scare the minorities like the proponents who undertook bike yatras in favour of construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya through Muslim-dominated areas. Yet, here at Shaheen Bagh, there were flags and festoons everywhere, much loved, always celebrated by all. Twice, the women sent a strong statement about the place of national symbols in their heart. On the night of 31 December, when much of urban India was ushering in the new year at parties, the women here stood in reverence to the national anthem at midnight. Holding the tricolour in their hand, they renewed their pledge to protect the Constitution, read out the Preamble before retiring for the day after singing ‘Sarfarooshi ki tammana’. It was a feast of sight and sound, an intermingling of hope and confidence. *The Citizen* noted:

The protest has become a virtual portrayal of all that is good in humanity with others bringing food, sharing blankets, singing songs of resistance, holding hands and stoking India’s potpourri of diversity and pluralism.

So it was but natural for Delhi to make its way to Shaheen Bagh to usher in 2020 with the women and their families. And together reclaim the national anthem and the national flag that had been the emblem of India’s struggle for independence against those who sought to control her will.⁶

Then on Republic Day, the three grandmothers of the movement—namely, Bilquis, Sarwari and Asma Khatoon—along with Radhika Vemula, mother of Dalit scholar Rohith who died under mysterious circumstances, and Saira, mother of Quran hafiz Junaid who was lynched aboard a train, pooled in their energies. The five women hoisted the tricolour together, sang the

national anthem with some 40,000 people in attendance. It was a sight to give goose pimples to patriots. For the women, though, it had become an everyday affair. Many times a day, they read the preamble aloud, many times they stood up for the national anthem, endlessly they sang ‘Saare jahan se achcha’.

The improvised stage itself told a story with photographs of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar hung prominently besides those of Maulana Azad, Bhagat Singh, Ashfaqullah and Ramprasad Bismil, among others. It was the women’s message to the larger society: Gandhiji deserved to be remembered every day and not just when some odd ball decided to hail his assassinator Nathuram Godse; the nation owed a debt of gratitude to revolutionaries like Ashfaq and Bismil, often forgotten by successive governments at the Centre; Maulana Azad was as integral to the founding of the nation as Sardar Patel.

Every evening, there were non-political speakers, or upcoming leaders like Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan, Kanhaiya Kumar, Jignesh Mewani and Umar Khalid. Then there were stars of the music world like Shubha Mudgal and T.M. Krishna, and a comedian like Kunal Kamra—they all came in with a message of solidarity. As did sociologists and historians from Jamia, JNU and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). Not to ignore the good cheer spread in times dark and despondent by upcoming poets. They kept the women occupied when the going got tough or mundane. As did the tireless support of Sikh brothers, one of whom, D.S. Bindra, sold his flat to feed the protestors every day.

Yet, they all came in like fresh breeze and went away as quickly. All through the day, from dawn to dusk, from dusk somehow to dawn, the women soldiered on relentlessly, knowing they could not afford to tire or quit. Their bodies ached, their knees wobbled, the chill of Delhi winters often sent shivers down their spines. Their spirit did not waver though. Moving away was not an option. At stake was India’s future as a pluralist nation that abided by the letter and spirit of the Constitution. Also, at stake was the future of these endlessly brave women. For too long they had been dismissed as ‘mere housewives’. Here, they stood as a beacon, giving hope to a nation besieged, to a community demonised and a gender always under-appreciated.

They succeeded. And how! There sprouted a million Shaheen Baghs across the country. From Khureji to Jafrabad, from Mustafabad to Hauz Rani, women built their own Shaheen Baghs in Delhi, some twenty-two of them actually. Then came up Shaheen Baghs across Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. All led by women, all taking on the might of the state, determined to stand up for the values of the founding fathers. Many had to bear police batons, some had even their rugs and blankets confiscated by the police. Denied microphones, deprived of toilets, they soldiered on, from one night to another, one week to another, one month to another. Truly, Shaheen Bagh was no longer a protest. It had become a movement—a movement that beckoned a revolution.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shaheen Bagh: From a Protest to a Movement would not have been a reality without the unwavering faith of Praveen Tiwari, Commissioning Editor, Bloomsbury. When we first aired the idea, he responded with such positive energy that our own faith in the project was redoubled. Then Shreya Chakraborti and Nitin Valecha lent their professional expertise to the exercise. Grateful beyond words. It is also the faith that was kept burning bright by the brave women of Shaheen Bagh who not only kindled a fresh ray of hope in times dark and despondent but also inspired new Shaheen Baghs, not just in Delhi but across the country. Salute.

This book, probably the first of many to be written about the protest that inspired a movement for self-identity by Muslim women, would not have been possible without the support of Aftab Ahmad sahib and Arti Prasad. The two were not only a part of the team that kept the engine of Shaheen Bagh up and running but were also always accessible for cross-checking any unconfirmed piece of news that was never too far from the protest. Almost every week, there were messages that went viral telling the readers that the police was likely to remove the protestors in an hour or two. Every time, more and more women trooped in, leaving all other business. Every time, we turned to Aftab and Arti for confirmation or denial. Also, a note of thanks is due to Aasif Mujtaba, one of the few men involved with the protest since day one.

A note of thanks is due to colleagues at *The Hindu* and *Frontline*, particularly Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, V. Venkatesan, Purnima Tripathi and Anando Bhakto. Also, we cannot miss expressing gratitude to brothers Irfan Ahmed, Masroor Mian, Mansoor Ansari, Mushtaq Ahmed and Mohammed Zubair. And Nadeem Khan, who readily shared his knowledge with us. Of course, dear Pheroze Vincent not only shared information about Shaheen Bagh but also exchanged his views and ideas that have redefined the way India protests. Thank you. Then there were the long-distance prayers of brothers Tausief and Tauqueer Ausaf, besides the selfless support of sisters Muslima and Sajida. Not to forget the note of hope always emitted by Sana Khan, S.M. Umair and Rida Sadaqat, as also the inputs shared by Sohail

chacha. We cannot be guilty of not acknowledging the generosity shown by Anjana Rajan who, yet again, found time to read a good portion of the manuscript. Or the constant support, sometime boisterous and cheerful, at others, calm and quiet, of our lovely daughters Maryam, Aliza, Juveria and Mishal.

And yes, thank you dear Manisha Mathews, our friend of many years, for believing in the cause.

Retrieving National Symbols



The protestors celebrated Republic Day with unprecedented gusto.

It started not from a madrasa or a mosque. It started from the streets of India's capital and, fittingly, soon reached the roads and streets of practically every state of the country. At the forefront of this movement were the faceless women of Shaheen Bagh, never suspected of nursing political gravitas or often seen in an exhibition of patriotism. Yet, they not only threw many a stereotype out of the window, they also turned many an assumption about nationalism on its head.

Since 2014, when Narendra Modi came to power riding on a massive vote in his favour, a uniquely muscular, aggressive form of nationalism had come to characterise public discourse. Under this form of heightened nationalism, the tricolour was often used by a section of population as a weapon to browbeat the minorities, question their patriotism, even their right to be in India. The national flag was in danger of becoming a weapon for the advancement of majoritarianism. For instance, after the dastardly gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim girl in Kathua, local Hindutva activists led a tricolour march in support of favour of Special Police Officer Deepak Khajuria (an accused along with former revenue official Sanji Ram, Special Police Officer Surender Verma, Head Constable Tilak Raj, Sub-inspector Anand Dutta and a civilian Parvesh Kumar). A special court in Pathankot later convicted six of the accused: ‘A special court on Monday convicted six of the eight accused in the gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl at Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir in early 2018’¹, *The Economic Times* reported.

In Uttar Pradesh, barely months after Yogi Adityanath had become the chief minister in March 2017, there was a Tiranga Yatra in Kasganj—a rally with the tricolour, organised by the BJP youth wing as part of its ‘Bharat Jodo Abhiyan’ (Unite India Campaign). Organised by members of Sankalp Foundation, a bike rally was taken out as part of the Yatra on Republic Day in 2018. It led to communal clashes that resulted in the loss of one life; the victim being identified as Chandan Gupta, a member of the Foundation. (Incidentally, on 30 January 2020, the youth who attacked the Jamia students in Delhi claimed he was avenging the death of Gupta, a claim denied by the deceased’s father: ‘I condemn the act of open firing at Jamia protestors in strongest possible words. We are a non-violent society and protest should always be peaceful. I have lost my son in violence,’² he was quoted as saying by *The Times of India*).

The yatra, which was taken through minority-dominated areas, was replete with provocative slogans, including the much-in-controversy Bharat Mata ki Jai and Vande Mataram. It seemed there were only two ways to prove one’s patriotism—either shout Bharat Mata ki Jai or sing Vande Mataram. For purveyors of coercive patriotism, singing the patriotic song

‘Sare jahan se achcha’ did not suffice, not even standing in respect to the national anthem. *The Times of India* reported:

Several CCTV footage and videos shot from mobile phones showed how the foundation members as well as other youths on motorbikes allegedly engaged in a fight with the residents of Muslim-dominated locality. Later, the youth in the yatra were purportedly seen firing shots in the air and hitting a Muslim youth with a lathi which sparked the violence.³

The Kasganj administration denied permission for any Tiranga Yatra in subsequent years, citing the communal clashes. Suddenly, the tricolour, which signifies the unity of our great nation, was being used to divide people on communal lines. Incidentally, barely months before the Kasganj clashes, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tweeted: ‘These Tiranga Yatras have generated a groundswell of support and are integrating people towards working for a New India by 2022.’ His ministerial colleague Jitendra Singh led a Tiranga Yatra of his own to liberate India from ‘terrorism, communalism and corruption’⁴, as *The Financial Express* reported. While Singh led the yatra in Jammu, there were other yatras all over the country, including places like Amravati and Jodhpur. These yatras were a manifestation of aggressive, masculine nationalism that seemed intolerant of dialogue or debate.

Then in December 2018, the tricolour was put to gross misuse by Hindutva extremists as several yatras were organised across Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh for the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya. In most of these yatras, youngsters tied the tricolour to their bikes, wore a saffron bandana and even flashed trishuls (tridents). The irony of using the tricolour as synonymous with the aspirations of some practitioners of one religion was initially lost on many. It was soon powerfully reinforced with frequent scenes of kanwariyas, or devotees of Shiva, performing the ritual of returning with water from the Ganges, or Gangajal, at the end of their pilgrimage, or kanwar yatra. They would indulge in violence, smash cars and shops, loot vendors, often use provocative slogans and, in general, indulge in blatant hooliganism. All this with a tricolour either in their hand or tied to their vehicles as they travelled across towns and cities of North India. Such had been their fear that

motorists avoided coming close to their cavalcade. It had less to do with adhesive faith, more to do with divisive politics. *India Today* reported on the increasing use of the tricolour during pilgrimage, and the attempt to link it to a particular religion:

While kanwariyas have been a common sight for time immemorial during the holy month of Shrawan, a rare sight awaits anyone who happens to travel on the Delhi–Haridwar highway. Besides the saffron flags (bhagwa pataka), the whole route is also full of national flags.

Initially, one would confuse whether it is a religious pilgrimage or some rehearsal for the forthcoming 70th Independence Day celebrations because the entire route is dotted with national flags.

The highway is generally painted in saffron. Millions of kanwariyas wear saffron dress. Tents are covered in saffron. All vehicles like the chariots, motor bikes, bicycles, cars and tractors are also decorated with saffron clothes and flags. But the national flags stand out and they attract the attention of any passer-by due to the white and green colours and the Ashok Chakra on them. Along with the saffron flags, the kanwariyas also carry the tricolour.

Tricolours are found waving atop all types of vehicles. They are also hoisted on the huge tents erected for the pilgrims to take shelter and rest along the 225-km road.... Carrying the national flag is a recent phenomenon. Most of the kanwariyas are carrying it for the first time, though some said they have been doing so for the past three years....Congress' national spokesperson Manish Tewari went a step further than that. Talking to *India Today*, he said, 'It is an attempt by certain elements to merge religion into nationalistic endeavour. It goes to the heart of RSS' project of wanting to turn India into a one-religion nation.'⁵

It was a far cry from the years of yore when the Shiv bhakts would come back with only Gangajal. Occasionally, they carried saffron flags and/or idols or portraits of Lord Shiva. The change came about post-2014, when the saffron flag was mixed with the national flag even as the pilgrims continued with their often-violent ways. As politicisation of religion threatened to demean the national flag, the Supreme Court intervened in August 2018, as reported by *NDTV*:

Vandalism and destruction of public property cannot be allowed, the Supreme Court said today in strong observations about violent protests as the centre's lawyer cited, among other instances, the recent spike in havoc unleashed by

Kanwar pilgrims ‘Damage to public properties is a serious issue... This is a grave situation and this must stop. We will take action and won’t wait for amendments,’ the court said. These comments came after the government’s lawyer Attorney General K.K. Venugopal told the top court: ‘Every week we have major riots including educated people. We had Maratha protests and SC/ST protests.’

‘Judges might have seen media reports how Kanwariyas damaged cars, overturning it’, Mr Venugopal added, referring to videos of Kanwariyas attacking vehicles including police cars. ‘There has to be an FIR and responsibilities fixed’, he added.⁶

Coinciding with the mixing of religion and national symbols, there were attempts to question the patriotism of common Indians with slogans and songs. In March 2016, the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly threw out Waris Pathan of All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) for refusing to chant Bharat Mata ki Jai. Around the same time, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh sarsanghchalak (head), Mohan Bhagwat, weighed in, ‘Now the time has come when we have to tell the new generation to chant “Bharat Mata ki Jai” (hail mother India). It should be real, spontaneous and part of all-round development of the youth.’

‘I don’t chant that slogan. What are you going to do, Bhagwat sahab,’ retorted Asaduddin Owaisi, Lok Sabha MP from Hyderabad and president of AIMIM. He added, ‘Nowhere in the Constitution it says that one should say “Bharat Mata ki Jai”’. In response, Arun Jaitley, the Finance Minister then, did not hold back, arguing that

‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ is not merely a slogan. It was a mantra of inspiration to countless freedom fighters during the independence struggle. It is the heartbeat of a billion people today. It is the reiteration of our constitutional obligations as citizens to uphold its primacy.⁷

Next month, in April 2016, the largest Islamic seminary in the country, Darul Uloom Deoband, issued a fatwa stating Muslims should not chant the slogan ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ as it was against the basic tenets of their religion. The fatwa stated that chanting the slogan was against ‘tauheed’ or ‘oneness of Allah’, which forms the core of Islam. Around this time, Abhishek Singhvi, the spokesman of the Congress, sought to douse the

flames, stating, 'I will forcefully express my right to raise the chant of "Bharat Mata ki jai". Equally forcefully, I will resist attempts to punish someone for not raising the chant.' All through, Singhvi's opponents were clearly leading the debate, deciding on who is a patriot and who is not, keen to dole out certificates of nationalism. An inability to chant a slogan regarded by Muslims to be an expression of reverence to a deity was the popular yardstick to judge one's patriotism! That the people handing out certificates of patriotism happened to hail from the party whose ideological parent had stepped upon the tricolour after Independence was a fact consigned to bank of amnesia.

Then, against all odds, almost out of nowhere, the tricolour was retrieved from the hands of divisive elements and restored to the common citizen of India. Its adhesive qualities were reinforced, its quality of uniting people behind it remained undiluted, as one found out soon. It happened almost overnight at Shaheen Bagh. Several hundred women, at times even going up to 40,000 of them, hit the streets of Delhi, waving the tricolour, singing patriotic songs, concluding with the national anthem. Day in day out, for weeks on end, they sat in protest, holding on to the national symbols, sometimes out of love and respect, at times to fend off worse charges. Supposedly only fighting against CAA-NPR-NRC, they were actually expressing the latent frustration at their patriotism being questioned, they wanted their right to be equal Indians restored. They had as much right to national symbols, as the propagandists of Hindutva or anybody else, was their silent message. The prevalent stereotypes about minorities being less nationalist vanished into thin air when the Shaheen Bagh women adopted the tricolour, the national anthem, etc. For their opponents, the national symbols were hitherto weapons to browbeat Muslims; for Shaheen Bagh, they provided a protective armour. The women revived their profound commitment to the Constitution of India in the most spectacular manner. It was also probably for the first time in independent India that Muslim women came out on the streets to uphold the Constitution of India, their national symbols. The Shaheen Bagh fight was unprecedented in the annals of the country. In the past when Muslims had stepped out in the public arena, the fight was invariably to uphold the Sharia, or at least its interpretation from the prism of some clerics. Back in the mid-1980s, when the community came out in large numbers during the Shah Bano

controversy, there were more skull caps than hijab or abaya-clad women seen in the public space. Yes, the question was about giving maintenance to a divorced woman, but it seemed the men were more keen on deciding the fate of women. Then again, during the Babri Masjid rallies and marches, there was a proliferation of bearded and skull-cap wearing men; the women were not even an afterthought. It seemed the men had a monopoly over the mosque too. More recently, during the instant triple talaq debate in India, and the formulation of Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, the opposition came mostly, yet again, from the Muslim men. There were instances of Muslim women too stepping out, such as the Ramlila Maidan rally in Delhi or another one in Mumbai, but the cases were too infrequent to alter the contours of debate or even to take the proprietary rights from men. The occasional women's rally only reinforced the allegation that they were doing it at the behest of men, something the Hindutva propagandists, including even the then chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, did not abstain from doing even during the Shaheen Bagh protest.

Still be it the Shah Bano case, the Shayara Bano instant talaq verdict or the fight for the ownership of Babri Masjid, the protest was always about protecting Muslim interests, upholding the supremacy of the Quran and Hadiths. The Shaheen Bagh protest was the first instance when members of the community not only came out in huge numbers to uphold the Constitution, but actually led the movement for protection of the idea of India. The Shaheen Bagh movement which only technically started off as a sit-in against the CAA combined with the NPR and NRC, soon developed into a battle for the idea of India as conceived by the founding fathers of the nation. Not only did the Shaheen Bagh women stand up for their own rights, or the rights of the community or even air the fears of the poor, the landless, the deprived, they actually presented a more inclusive picture of India than had been allowed to enter public discourse in recent years with a Hindutva government driving the agenda and the media, having abdicated its responsibility long ago, happy to play the foot soldiers of the authorities.

The women took it upon themselves; it was fine to be a woman, a Muslim woman, a woman from a so-called ghetto of the community, and still nurse patriotic feelings. Or better still, shape the public discourse. They told the nation they were not alone, nor were they fighting only for the community. They had with them the Sikh brothers who had come all the

way from Punjab and not only set up their free food stall, but actually sat in solidarity with them. They had Christian sisters coming in from Kerala, Adivasi women trooping in from Chhattisgarh, not to forget the young crowd of students of JNU, Jamia Millia Islamia and other places. The fight was not for a specific community, or even a generation. It soon became a fight to protect many generations of Indians at the same time. They made space for Kashmiri Pandits too, raising their voice for their right to a homeland, something no political party had done from a public platform for the past thirty years. As minorities, they understood the plight of the minorities. Hence came the support of Muslim women for the displaced Pandit brothers and sisters.

It was a fight for the ideals of the nation too. And the women set about reminding us of many of the forgotten heroes of our freedom struggle. To begin with, they told us about the bravery of Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah—the two revolutionaries who attacked a train carrying the British money in Kakori, near Lucknow, in 1925 and were hanged by the British in 1927. Not only did they sing ‘Sarfarooshi ki tamanna’, they also put up photographs of Bismil and Ashfaqullah at the protest site. For a generation that had forgotten about them, the combined names of Ashfaq–Bismil or Bismil–Ashfaq was an apt reminder of the heroes we had, the pluralist glue that bound us together.

The women revived the national connect with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad too, now almost a forgotten hero who opposed the idea of Pakistan. After many decades, one saw his bearded photograph being waved about in many gatherings; his picture was even put up inside a mock detention centre at Shaheen Bagh. The irony of putting the maulana’s picture in a detention centre was not lost on anybody as he had fought for an inclusive India versus Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s concept of a separate state of Pakistan for Muslims. And today, the inheritors of a composite nation had their right to be here being questioned, with the fear of losing their citizenship looming large on the horizon.

The revival of Bismil–Ashfaq–Azad was an important contribution, but not the most important of the brave women of Shaheen Bagh. That lay in the revival of public dialogue around the works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi towards nation building. The women reminded whosoever cared to listen that their fight was for Ambedkar

rashtra (nation) versus Hindu rashtra. Some went a step further saying, ‘The fight is for protecting Ambedkar Rashtra from Manuvad. Saying the Hindutva forces want to bring about a Hindu Rashtra is wrong and misleading. They want to usher in a society based on Manu’s vision where Dalits would serve the upper castes.’ Thus, pledging allegiance to Ambedkar’s vision of India, the women often brought copies of the Constitution to the protest site, sang the national anthem many times a day and were happy to stand with the national flag in their hand every morning, every night. On Republic Day, watched by nearly 40,000 people, the three grandmothers of the protest, led by eighty-two-year-old Bilquis, Asma Khatoon and Sarwari, along with Radhika Vemula, mother of Dalit scholar Rohith and Saira, mother of Junaid who was lynched aboard a train in 2017, hoisted the tricolour, even as Jignesh Mewani, independent legislator from Vadgam, watched on, symbolising the marginalisation of both men and political forces. It was followed by a rendition of patriotic songs, and the national anthem. It was all inclusive, all charged with love for the motherland. So much so, about a week later, when there was an attack on the protestors by a man swearing allegiance to the Hindutva concept of the nation, they responded by first forming a human chain across the barriers of religion or caste, then standing together to sing the national anthem. At the most grave of provocation, in the face of most dire of circumstances, their faith in our national symbols remained unshaken. For the Shaheen Bagh women, it was no longer about the CAA–NPR–NRC, it was the second freedom struggle, a fight to found a society in which the weakest shall have a voice, all shall be treated equally whatever their religious denomination. Hence, the frequent use of the slogan of ‘azadi’ (freedom), and the women rallying behind Varun Grover’s song ‘Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge’, and so on.

So, what explains the emotionally charged revival of the Constitution and demonstrable proof of their nationalist belonging? The answer lies in the fact that for the first time in India since Independence, various minorities and marginalised communities came together to challenge certain discriminatory laws in a similar manner their predecessors did before 1947. It is probably this resemblance that struck an intense chord of meaning when slogans of ‘azadi’ were chanted or the second independent struggle was talked about.

As never before in the history of independent India, nationalist symbols acquired a protective frame for the minorities. Most of these symbols that had a mere ceremonial value for the minorities before 2014, became everyday instruments of survival and defence of personal liberty and security. The ideational distance between symbols and rituals of our nation and personal life of the minorities and the marginalised got suddenly transformed into a single existential embrace. The resurgence of nationalist fervour was deeply personal for the protestors at Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere. It required closer scrutiny to see how the survival instincts of the minorities, the Dalits and the Adivasis found their talisman in the Indian Constitution. Speaking the popular language of patriotism, using national symbols, the Shaheen Bagh caught the imagination of protestors across of the country, leaving their opponents dumbfounded. Their claim to sole ownership of these symbols had been smashed in the capital of India by the women of the segment of population they often used to legitimise their vehicle of hate and bigotry. The people who were frequently taunted with unsolicited advice to go to Pakistan had suddenly staked their own claim to nationalism, their right to India. There was one crucial difference though: their nationalism was inclusive, pacific and calm, unlike their opponents who were driven by anger, charged up with hate. Not once in their protest did they raise a slogan in anger, not once did the women say ‘Modi, down, down’. Nor did they preach shooting the opponents by calling them traitors. The fight was always about ideals, about right to live with dignity, equality and fraternity. Unsurprisingly, the Shaheen Bagh women, when confronted with a pro-CAA protest almost next door where slogans of ‘Shoot the traitors’ were repeatedly heard, responded, ‘In desh ke jawano par, phool barsao saaro par’ (On these youths of the country, shower flowers on all). The Mahatma would have been pleased.

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A Uniquely Women's Protest



An artwork by Anirban Ghosh depicting the brave women of Shaheen Bagh.

There is something unique about Shaheen Bagh. Rows and rows of women sit cross-legged on rugs, their heads covered with black hijab or scarves.

Others have colourful shawls and dupattas over their heads, and children on their lap. At times, they rock them to sleep, stroking their hair and tapping their back to calm them. Some children are as small as a few days old; they are wrapped in layers of little blankets! Others are in nursery or kindergarten. Many are much older, on the brink of teenage. Often, the mothers give them a quick bite, a samosa, a sandwich or a piece of cake. The women multitask with finesse here too, interspersing their motherly duties with slogans of Inquilaab Zindabad (Hail Revolution). Their children need them, their nation needs them. They strike a balance. It is a tightrope walk they seem to have mastered. They understand it is not a day-long protest, or a weekend march. It is a prolonged struggle for their identity, for the identity of the nation, for the protection of the soul of India. It is no longer about CAA alone; it is about the Constitution of India. It is a satyagraha to save the dream of the founding fathers. They are prepared for a long haul.

On 22 January 2020, when the Supreme Court gave the Government of India four weeks to respond to a hundred and forty odd petitions about CAA–NPR–NRC, the women, far from losing hope, gathered in greater numbers, egged each other on, not letting their shoulders droop, and quietly increased the size of their pandal. They knew more women will troop in solidarity. No complaints, no mumblings of disgust. They set about finding a solution to the emerging problem, a bigger pandal meant more rugs, more cups of tea, more plates of biryani for newcomers. And they set about arranging it all methodically—much like the lady of the house does when unforeseen guests drop in.

Here in Shaheen Bagh, not everybody is a homemaker, as erroneously believed. Some are teachers and lecturers. Others are lawyers and doctors, a few are businesswomen too. Many are grandmothers whose area of operation has always been their homes. They prove their mettle in public, and silence all the doubting Thomases. As speakers after speakers address them, they reciprocate their zest with enthusiasm. Just when a speaker tends to get monotonous and soporific, the women wake him up in their own unique ways. Unlike men who either walk away during such a session, or keep mumbling among themselves, the women of Shaheen Bagh burst into

the popular slogan Inquilaab Zindabad in the middle of a speech, letting the person on stage know in no uncertain terms that they have had enough of him or her. Here, the women clearly call the shots. Take the seating arrangements, for instance. As one stands on the stage, one finds only rows and rows of women in front. Most sit cross-legged, one or two would have a chair or a stool they would have brought from home as physical limitations do not permit them to sit on the floor for long hours. Many are old, some have back or knee problems, some have had a delivery recently.

The grandmothers are on a raised platform; they sit on a wooden takht (bed), just near the road divider, the place they have been calling their home since 15 December 2019 when, to the surprise of everybody, they left the safe confines of their homes to sit in protest against brutality of Delhi Police in Jamia Millia Islamia on students who were protesting against CAA. Until that moment, the grandmothers would have never stepped out for a protest; their world being confined to the prayer mat at home with an occasional serial on television thrown in for a little entertainment. In seclusion lay their dignity, honour and safety, they were told. They did not hit the streets after the 2002 Gujarat genocide, the 1992 demolition of Babri Masjid, the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. Not even after demonetisation, when many women were rumoured to have lost their little secret savings hidden in their kitchen shelf. Only some had stepped out in Emergency, but that was more than forty years ago, and limited to women of Old Delhi. The intervening years had lulled them into a blend of complacency and compliance. It seemed they could take everything in their stride as long as they could stay at home. It all changed with the anti-CAA protests. Their children were attacked in Jamia; the students' future was at stake. The women could no longer keep quiet. They came out, first in a dozen or so, then a few hundreds, then many thousands. They put up the stoutest resistance against the new chronology of NRC–CAA–NPR, as expressed by the home minister. They hoisted the tricolour on the Republic Day, but actually kept it flying all through.

Neither the bitter cold of Delhi—the capital experienced the coldest day since 1901 at the fag end of 2019—nor the pitter-patter of winter rain, nor the intermittent days of suffocating smog could drive them away. Today, they claim to be able to regulate traffic on Road Number 13A that links Shaheen Bagh–Jasola Vihar with Noida, helping students reach schools and ambulances hospitals. Some have had the confidence to go meet the

Lieutenant Governor (LG) of Delhi Anil Baijal as part of an eight-member delegation. They called on the LG to discuss the opening of one side of the road at the protest site to traffic. Like seasoned negotiators, the women promised to pass on the LG's message about opening the road to other protestors without committing to opening the road!

The men? They are all sidelined, literally and otherwise. They stand behind a rope which is tied from one end to the other in a rectangle, making sure no man enters the women's only zone. In Delhi's very public space, a frequently used road, women have made a place all their own. The men shuffle in and out. This is one place though where they don't stand and stare. When there is a huge rush, as on Sunday or when a charismatic civil society leader drops in, the men make a human chain around the protest site, enabling women to reach or go back from the pandal without the fear of being touched in an inappropriate manner. Every woman feels safe from the unwanted male gaze. Of course, the men are not just passive bystanders. They too raise their voice and a clenched fist when it comes to slogans, and chip in as volunteers to help distribute food packets and tea. Otherwise, it is the women protestors who provide wings to Shaheen Bagh stir. They make placards at home. They bring them to the site. Some of the most interesting ones, including the one that shows a woman with a hijab and a bindi, in an oblique reference to protestors being recognised by their clothes.

When a speaker has something new to say, or when a popular upcoming leader, such as Kanhaiya Kumar, Jignesh Mewani or Chandrashekhar Azad, comes in, the women listen with rapt attention, at times even question the speaker, asking him to clear their doubts, much like a literary festival where an author is asked by the audiences to take in a few questions at the end of a session. It is then that the true spirit of the movement comes to the fore. Toothless, unimaginably frail women light up the atmosphere by calling on inner reservoirs of energy to raise a cry for freedom, freedom from hunger, freedom from communalism and casteism, freedom from graded citizenship. They sing behind a young hostess on stage like seasoned artists. When the hostess asks, 'Hume chahiye kya' (What do we want?), the women unite in saying 'azadi'. At that moment, they can take on the world and bring the most arrogant of dictators to his knees. It is women empowerment unlike any in recent times. No political leader worth the

name, no political party at the forefront, just a civil society movement led by those most severely impacted by CAA–NPR–NRC.

What's more, the Shaheen Bagh women are not shy about telling the world that this is their movement, they will do things their way. From bringing children and their school bags along, from knitting needles to copies of the Constitution, the women decide the priorities at Shaheen Bagh. When it comes to the core issue of having to prove their citizenship, they reply loud and clear, 'Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge'. 'Tum goli chalva do, tum sar katwa do, hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge' (You use bullets, you chop off our heads, we will not show the papers). It is a cry for resistance. It is a moment when women are ready to oppose everybody who questions their integrity, their right to be equal citizens of the country. By itself, it is empowering. Often, they sing 'Hum honge kamyab' (We shall overcome), confident that their perseverance against heavy odds will pay off.

That Shaheen Bagh is unique becomes apparent when one receives an invitation to come to Shaheen Bagh with knitting needles and wool. Turns out, the women have decided to knit even as they protest against the CAA. In a corner of that very public space, women gather with their knitting needles, and are available for anybody who wants a sweater knitted. They just have to supply the wool of their colour of choice. No knitting charges. They can come back in a few days to take the all new sweater home! Even as women get busy knitting, their children can often be seen playing in front of the main stage. Some take bold steps to climb on to the stage itself, announcing 'Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge'. Though many tend to take it lightly, this little act of children announces to the world loud and clear: Shaheen Bagh is a women's protest, by women, for men, women and children. Nobody would have ever seen children running around the stage in a typical street protest led by men. Shaheen Bagh is different.

Different too in the way the women balance their motherly duties with the call of the nation. They have a relay system of sorts in place under which women with schoolgoing kids join after sending their children to school. Then the ones with grown-up children go home to pack them off with breakfast and maybe even lunch. In the afternoon again, the younger mothers go back to pick up their children from the bus stop or school, feed them at home, then come to the protest site. At that time, others return home to cook and clean for their husbands before they reach home in the evening!

Many women come to the protest site every afternoon or evening with schoolgoing kids and their bags. As mothers raise their voice against CAA, the children get down to completing their homework. In between singing patriotic songs and challenging the government to break their unity, the women take out their mobile phones to throw a flashlight on their child's book to enable him or her to read clearly. You see, Shaheen Bagh might be giving a new meaning to being a woman in modern India but it still cannot take street lights for granted!

Homework done, the children are packed off home. Often their fathers come to collect them, a far cry from the usual practice of working women dropping and picking up their babies from a creche. Else, an elder brother or even a neighbourhood uncle takes them home to rest and sleep. You see, Shaheen Bagh has broken many a barrier; the anonymity of urban living, for instance. Here, neighbours use each other's services without any apology. And gender rules are being bent. At times, men gather at one place to cook for all the women, at others, women pool in their resources and cook in the house of a woman who has the largest kitchen! Of course, they have the benefit of free langar (community lunch), courtesy five truckloads of stuff from Punjab which the volunteers of Kisan Manch brought in as the news of Shaheen Bagh spread far and wide. More help came in to provide food for protestors, reaching a stage where the women had to request Good Samaritans to send it instead to women protesting at other places. Talk of sorority!

Through with their homework, food and everything, the women bring Shaheen Bagh alive with their singing, their poetry. This time, they recite some of the best poetry of Faiz, singing, 'Hum Dekhenge', a poem that became hugely popular as civil society activists took on the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan. When they take a break from Faiz, they recite Habib Jalib's 'Dastoor', a poem they even sang on the Republic Day to convey a message of strength and solidarity. In fact, when the protest started, the women for days on end invited Shashibhushan Samad of JNU. Samad's recital of Jalib's resistance poetry in JNU had gone viral. And Shaheen Bagh women promptly invited him! Some even came draped in shawls with Jalib's couplet 'Zulm ki baat ko, jahl ki raat ko, main nahin manta' (I do not respect talk of cruelty, night of ignorance) painted on it! That was in the early days. But by the end of January, they have all learnt

the nazm and are in no mood to let go off it! At the impromptu library that has come up, one can find Faiz and Jalib's poetry!

It prompts noted Urdu poet and human rights activist Gauhar Raza to say:

Of course, we always knew Jalib and his Dastoor and loved both. But I haven't seen Dastoor being used in earlier protests or even during the Emergency. It is after 2014 that Jalib's works are quoted more and more. Dastoor's popularity has touched a high during these protests and Indian protesters are celebrating it like never before.¹

The Shaheen Bagh women have already smashed many a social barrier, bringing women out of their sheltered existence at home to the streets of India, standing up for the nation. And inspiring hundreds of other Shaheen Baghs across the country. Clearly, the anti-CAA protests have given these women wings to fly. And men a reason to be more flexible in their nests!

Notes

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How It All Started

Shaheen Bagh is the best thing to have happened to the beleaguered Muslim community in a long, long time. Since 2014, vast swathes of the community were living under the shadow of fear. Often, attacks were made on members of the community by a section of the larger society; persistently, the State too attacked the symbols of the community. Within a few weeks of the Narendra Modi-led government taking over the reins in 2014, a Muslim technocrat was lynched in Pune. The community took it in stride as a minor blip as the new government had come to power riding on the slogan of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (Everybody's support, everybody's development). It took a little more than a year though for the community to be dispossessed of illusions of being partners in development.

Having already ignored the conversion of around 150 members of the community to Hinduism in December 2014 in Agra (the members later came back to the Muslim fold), the community was jolted when forty-five-year-old Akhlaq was dragged out of his bedroom and lynched on the streets of Dadri in western Uttar Pradesh on mere suspicion of cow slaughter. The state police, before trying to lay their hands on the possible murderers, confiscated meat from Akhlaq's fridge to find out if it was mutton or beef, as if storing beef in one's kitchen was a crime. Akhlaq died a macabre death, his wife was widowed in the prime of life. Not a word escaped from the prime minister to either condemn those responsible for the lynching or a word in support of the widow.

Akhlaq's lynching, unfortunately, seemed to have blazed a trail for more cow slaughter-related allegations, resulting in lynching of the innocent. Pehlu Khan, Junaid, Qasim, Alimuddin Ansari, Rakbar and Afrazul were all lynched on mere suspicion of cow slaughter, or even transportation of cattle. Not one of the men was old; all were in their twenties or forties, except teenager Junaid. The allegations of cow slaughter were never proven, the killers were not punished. The widows waited for justice. The government completed its five-year term in May 2019. The affected women

though went about their life, trying to groom their children in the absence of their fathers. Every now and then, the lynch mob had a message for them with a fresh case of lynching; if it could happen to your men, you as women are like sitting ducks waiting for a man on the prowl. The women kept their patience, knocked on the doors of the courts and waited for justice.

Amidst all the lynching cases, women had been impacted by demonetisation. They had seen their husbands stand in long queues for days on end to recover their own money from the bank. And many women had seen their kitchen savings reduced to a piece of paper. They still kept their patience.

Then came the government in a new avatar in May 2019. This time, the slogan was Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas (Everybody's support, everybody's development, everybody's confidence). Yet again, the women were let down by the government. The Muslim women wanted clarity on the status of victims of instant triple talaq, whether their marriage sustained after three pronouncements of divorce or not. The Supreme Court in 2017 had made instant triple talaq invalid without commenting on the status of marriage of women who had suffered this ignominy. The government came up with the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act in 2019. The new law, while claiming to make life better for Muslim women, made things worse. It criminalised triple talaq and made men vulnerable to three years' imprisonment and fine. The Act was opposed by a section of Muslim women as it took away a squabbling couple's right to reconciliation, a right granted to them by the Quran. Effectively, it also made instant triple talaq the final irrevocable divorce, as a man jailed following the wife's complaint of instant triple talaq was never likely to resume cohabitation with her after being released. Again, it went against the provisions of the Quran that allows a man to resume cohabitation with his wife within the three-month iddah or waiting period. Or marry her again directly after the iddah period. It may be recalled, the Prophet too considered multiple pronouncements of talaq at a single sitting as a single divorce, thereby revocable. The new Act though went against the spirit of Islamic laws, deprived couples of a chance to make things work again. The community though took it in stride, confident that if a husband and wife want to resume cohabitation after divorce, the State cannot enter their bedrooms.

Around the same time, lynching of Muslim men by criminals mouthing provocative slogans resumed. This time though there was a difference. Prior to 2019, there were at least allegations of cow slaughter or transportation, this time, men were lynched by these goons simply after they were asked their name or asked to recite the Kalima, the first tenet of Islam. Now, no euphemism of any allegation was needed, just the fact that a man was a Muslim was deemed enough of a provocation kill. More women turned widows even as they watched with horror the videos of Hindutva goons taking out a tricolour march in favour of the alleged rapists in Kathua, where an eight-year-old Muslim girl was repeatedly gangraped until she died. The message was clear to the community: the community felt under siege.

If anybody still needed any prodding, it was with the CAA 2019, under which a non-Muslim from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh could apply for Indian citizenship. The Act clearly kept even persecuted Muslims out of its ambit, giving a message loud and clear: Hindus and Sikhs, among others, have the first right to India. A Muslim, for instance a Shia or a Qadiani in Pakistan, could not be considered at par with a non-Muslim. To compound matters, the Act was linked with the NRC by Home Minister Amit Shah, who repeatedly said both in Parliament and in election rallies and television interviews that a Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain or a Christian left out of the NRC can find his or her name back on it through CAA. He excluded Muslims from the same right, thereby discriminating between citizens of one faith and another. Popular news website Scroll.in listed the five occasions he talked about them.¹

Further, the government brought in the NPR (different from the Census survey). Again, the home minister went on record saying that the NPR is the first step for NRC, though he later sought to delink the two.

The link was exposed when *India Today* wrote:

While Shah dispelled reports pointing at an NPR–NRC link, the ruling government had linked NRC and NPR several times in the past; it is also mentioned in an earlier official notification of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Proof: The fact that NPR is the first step towards conducting a nationwide NRC is mentioned in the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003 under the Citizenship Act 1955.²

The writing was not just on the wall, it was being screamed loud and clear by the government: graded citizenship was here. The underlying message being: Hindus and others belong here, not so the Muslims. It seemed a clear expression of the views of V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar who had claimed that India belongs only to those who have their *pitrabhoomi* (fatherland) and *punyabhoomi* (sacred land) here; others can live here at the sweet will of the majority community without asking for any privileges or even rights. Also, the new Act seemed to be another step towards fulfilling the prediction of a BJP leader in 2014, where he claimed India will have no Muslims or Christians by the end of 2021. The noted fortnightly magazine *Frontline* stated:

A few months after Narendra Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister in 2014, Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) *pracharak* and BJP leader Rajeshwar Singh claimed, ‘Muslims and Christians will be wiped out of India by December 31, 2021’. His words were promptly dismissed as the utterance of a fringe element. But five years later, the Modi government seems intent on proving his hate speech correct. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) passed by Parliament in December shuts the door on Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Keeping the doors open for persecuted minorities in these countries, the Bill differentiates between victims on the basis of religion. And a Muslim, no matter how discriminated or persecuted he might be, has no hope of getting Indian citizenship any longer.

[...] With this discrimination on the basis of religion, the new Bill takes forward the “othering” concept of Muslims propagated by the RSS ideologue M.S. Golwalkar, and earlier by the Hindu Mahasabha’s icon V.D. Savarkar. Golwalkar believed that only those qualified to be Indians whose *pitrubhoomi* (fatherland) and *punyabhoomi* (sacred land) was in India. Those whose *pitrubhoomi* was in India but *punyabhoomi* elsewhere could not be regarded as true Indians. In other words, people following Semitic faiths were barred from being Indians. They could live only at the sufferance of the majority community.

Writing in *We or Nationhood Defined*, Golwalkar said, ‘The non-Hindu peoples in Hindusthan (different from Hindustan) must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age-long traditions but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead—in other words they

must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights. There is, or at least should be, no other course for them to adopt. We are an old nation; and let us deal, as old nations ought to and do deal, with foreign races, who have chosen to live in our country.'

Similarly, Savarkar, who coined the term Hindutva, wrote in 'Who is a Hindu?', 'A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharat-Varsha from the Indus to the Seas as his Fatherland as we as his Holyland, that is the cradle land of his religion. These are the essentials of Hindutva—a common nation (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*) and a common civilisation (*sanskriti*). All these essentials could best be summed up by stating in brief that he is a Hindu to whom Sindhusthan is not only a pitrbhu but also a punyabhu. For the first two essentials of Hindutva nation and *jati*—clearly denoted and connoted by the word pitrbhu while the third essential of *sanskriti* is pre-eminently implied by the word *punyabhu*, as it is precisely *sanskriti* including *sanskaras* i.e. rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments, that makes a land a Holyland.'

³

With the Bill becoming an Act in no time, youngsters across the country took to the streets. There were protests against graded citizenship and the threat to put anybody in a detention centre on failure to provide documents in defence. The students of JNU, various Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Jamia Millia Islamia, AMU, Maulana Azad National Urdu University came out to protest, asking the government to roll back CAA and not bring in NPR. Their protests fell on deaf ears with the government reiterating that there was not a question of going back an inch on the subject. Then came the tipping point. The students of Jamia took out a peace march on the campus on the evening of 15 December 2019. It did not end peacefully though. Rather, there was a pitched battle between the police and some demonstrators; none of whom was later found to be a student. There were reports of injured students being taken to various hospitals, including Safdarjung Hospital, Holy Family and Al-Shifa, the last one reporting constant inflow of students with varying injuries, ranging from a minor bruise to a fracture. Two men were admitted with bullet injuries to Safdarjung Hospital, belying the police claim that no bullets were used by the police. Soon, a video surfaced wherein two girl students were seen looking at policemen, and a civilian accompanying them, in the eye. The girls were seen shielding a man whom the policemen were striking with

batons. They literally covered the man to protect him. That the policemen were accompanied by a man who dressed like a civilian but used a police baton and helmet made things worse. The students knew what they were up against.

Around the same time came reports and visuals of students studying in the library being subjected to tear gas by the police. The university administration denied giving permission to police to enter the campus, with the Jamia proctor Waseem Ahmed confirming it in his tweet. Not just were youngsters studying in the library hit, those praying at the mosque were also not spared, even girl students taking shelter inside the toilets were dragged out. The police alleged the students had been involved in stone pelting. The *India Today* reported:

The testimonies from those present in Jamia on Sunday, suggest that the police targeted individuals indiscriminately, even entering the mosque on campus and hurting a local cleric. Recounting the police attack in the university library, videos of which have now gone viral on social media, one Jamia student said, 'There were 50-60 students in the library. When the police started lobbing teargas towards the library, the students came upstairs and roughly 15 mins later, the police entered the campus by force. They broke the doors of the library and started shelling tear gas.' Showing his bandaged and bloodied knee and arms, the student said he was lucky enough to escape a head injury.

He said that the students in the library were not part of any protest.

Another student said Delhi Police pulled women in the library by their hair and thrashed them. Another eyewitness, Talib, who was in the university when the violence broke out that before the police entered the Jamia campus, there was no provocation from the students.

'I was here yesterday afternoon; the students were simply studying. There was no sloganeering and stone pelting before the police entered. The police were chasing some protestors who were outside and without any provocation entered the campus,' Talib said.

'They [Delhi Police] manhandled campus security. They entered the library and lobbed teargas shells. When the students tried to hide under desks, the police hit them with those desks,' he added.

Disagreeing with the Delhi Police's version, Talib said that no outside protestor entered the Jamia campus as the university gates had been locked from inside.

Another harrowing account from Sunday is of one Mohammad Irshad Khan, a guard in the Jamia campus and a former army man.

Khan said that he was guarding the gate of the Jamia campus when police entered the premise and headed towards the local mosque.

‘I was giving duty on the gate when the police entered and headed for the mosque. The imam (cleric) was in the mosque. I tried to appeal to the police to not enter the mosque and leave the imam,’ he said.

‘The police caught hold of the imam and when I tried to free him, I was abused and they kept beating me as they dragged me from the mosque to the ground,’ Khan added.⁴

The matter was no longer local, or about the clash of university students with the local police. The anti-CAA protests had lit a fire, and in a way blazed a trend. Not just Indian media, even the international media sat up and took notice. The widely respected *Al Jazeera* reported:

More than 100 students have been injured in India after baton-wielding police charged at them and fired tear gas at two federally-run universities where students were holding anti-citizenship law protests.

Students in New Delhi’s Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) and Uttar Pradesh state’s Aligarh Muslim University (AMU)—130 km (81 miles) from the capital—had been protesting since the new law was passed last week.⁵

Besides, with the BBC reporting ‘Fresh violence erupts in Delhi’⁶ and local media giving a minute-by-minute update, the local residents, many of whom had their family members studying in the university, could no longer be bystanders. They decided to step out, raise their voice. And to the surprise of everybody, it was the women of the community who led the way. For too long they had kept quiet watching their men being lynched, their savings going down the drain, the rape of their girl being celebrated with marches. And now their youngsters, forever asked by the elders to concentrate on their academics, were being tear gassed and attacked by the police while studying in the library. It was time to speak up. And to act. The new law had to be opposed. A cry had to be raised for the government to repeal it. First came a march in the lanes and bylanes of Okhla. Then women of Shaheen Bagh came out on the evening of 15 December 2019. Initially, just a dozen or so. They squatted on the road in protest. Soon men joined them. The next morning, the men left for work. The women continued to sit in protest. They were joined by more women. Then some

more women. The hitherto passive recipients had quietly become active agents of change. The first step in making history had been taken. These women were not university-educated feminists, or well versed with the discourse of nation, secularism and citizenship. The existential insecurity they and their children, husbands and brothers had been experiencing over the past many years aroused their hidden potential. They overcame the burden of silence. And the nation listened to their voice. Shaheen Bagh became a pilgrimage centre of secular, inclusive India.

Notes

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Why Shaheen Bagh?

When the anti-CAA protests hit Shaheen Bagh, it took most by surprise. Most residents of Delhi did not have an idea about the place. Many went to Google Maps to find its location. Aviral Anand summed up the larger society's ignorance in *Sabrang* thus:

As I get off the metro at the Jasola Vihar-Shaheen Bagh station, I am uncertain how to get to the Shaheen Bagh camp. I think there might be some signs from the metro station itself since the encampment had suddenly shot in the news. But none seemed apparent. So I look hopefully for a metro exit towards Shaheen Bagh, and sure enough, Gate number 3 leads in that direction. A further sign, 'Follow foot overbridge to Shaheen Bagh,' directs me thenceward. But from that distance I cannot spot any encampment. I am a little apprehensive.¹

Anand had to ask more than a couple of persons on the road to reach Shaheen Bagh, the epicentre of anti-CAA protests!

Those who knew the place well, they too were taken by surprise that Shaheen Bagh women had decided to leave the confines of their home to not only step out on the road to protest, but to actually sit at a public square, raise slogans against the new law, speak for the Constitution of the land even as they risked life and limb for it. The image of Shaheen Bagh women in the mind of the common man was one of a conservative section where women's domestic responsibilities overshadowed any other potential they have may in their inner reservoirs. They were supposed to be those anonymous souls who would spend their life in the seclusion of home in the name of dignity. It was an erroneous belief, as was to be proved.

It was not entirely surprising to see the guts and gumption of the students of Jamia Millia Islamia; youth has its compulsion, students their fearlessness. A photograph of some Jamia girls looking the policemen in the eye, even as they covered a man to protect him from the blows of the policemen, left many in awe of the youngsters. It is, however, the

determination and fortitude exhibited by women of Shaheen Bagh, located barely a couple of kilometres from the border of Noida in Uttar Pradesh, that not only pleasantly surprised the residents of Delhi, but gave a fillip to the campaign against CAA like none other. It was an entirely unexpected though absolutely welcome comfort for the people out on the streets of India against the discriminatory law.

It set our political scientists and sociologists thinking too. Seasoned sociologist Prof. Avijit Pathak of JNU visited the place as much to raise his voice alongside the protestors as to find out for himself about the ‘phenomenon’ that Shaheen Bagh had become within a couple of weeks of the women hitting the road. He came back to narrate, ‘I read about Shaheen Bagh; I saw videos; heard commentaries; and students and friends talked about it. But then, I visited the site, saw the phenomenon, felt it, and possibly experienced the ecstasy of the confluence of human souls for a higher cause. For me, the experience was amazing.’ So amazing that he discovered ‘the power of human possibilities. If inspired and motivated, each of us, irrespective of the socio-economic background, can do wonders.’ And Shaheen Bagh women, supposedly from the conservative section of an otherwise conservative minority, did exactly that!

Not too different was the understanding of Prof. Mohammed Talib, who once stayed barely a couple of kilometres from Shaheen Bagh when he taught sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia. Now teaching at Oxford, he related, ‘Shaheen Bagh has emerged as a powerful symbol from the wide urban sprawl centred around Okhla and Jamia Millia Islamia. Why Shaheen Bagh as a symbol of protest and hope? This is to be seen in the backdrop of the wider context of Muslim urban living where responsible people in the government holding negative prejudices addressed the area and its people in personal terms, largely with negative connotations. Shaheen Bagh addressed in terms of imagined traits of a community, with distinct dress and food habits. Shaheen Bagh was partly born in the way it was defined by dominant Hindutva sentiment looking for its ideological fodder against a community in a given area.’

But when the women sat on a long protest, it demolished many a stereotype about the area. Shaheen Bagh soon became what Prof. Talib called ‘a platform rather than a de-limited area which articulated disgust people expressed against the wanton manner in which most innocent

section of the population, its youth and students were targeted violently without accountability or legal restraint.’ And Shaheen Bagh, not entirely affluent—the colony has stretches of lofty houses with fancy gates, guards, and so on, just as it has stretches with the dwellings of the poor—found it within itself to organise the protest. It had little to do with its history, much to do with its sociology, the inter-personal relations of its residents. The colony had come up on tracts of agricultural land a little more than thirty years ago. Its founder was Ansarullah, who came to Delhi as a young man from Rampur in pursuit of higher education at Jamia. Later, he got into real estate. Along with his family, Ansarullah bought eighty bighas of land in Jasola village. He happened to be a lover of the works of illustrious Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal. In one of his nazms in 1935, ‘Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain’, Iqbal said, ‘Tu shaheen hai, parwaz hai kaam tera, tere samne aasman aur bhi hain’. Shaheen, or falcon, was a symbol of freedom for Iqbal. It struck a chord with Ansarullah. And thus, the colony came to be called Shaheen Bagh; though for easier familiarity, it was also called Abul Fazal Enclave-II. Abul Fazal Enclave is literally next door. Incidentally, Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot analysed the foundation of the colony in *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, where Gayer wrote in an essay:

AFE (Abul Fazl Enclave) is well defined, bounded as it is by the old Agra Canal (presently a nallah) in the west, by the west bank of the Yamuna in the east and by two roads (that from the junction of Okhla Head in the north and that from Kalindi Kunj to Sarita Vihar in the south). The population of this locality is almost exclusively Muslim, with the exception of a small Hindu-dominated pocket known as Nai Basti (new settlement), at the northwest extremity of the neighbourhood, of which AFE was originally an extension. This locality is divided into two parts: Abul Fazl I, the abode of middle-class and upper-class Muslims, and Abul Fazl-II (also known as Shaheen Bagh), which has a higher density of population and a larger concentration of lower middle-class Muslims, although it is undergoing a rapid process of gentrification.²

This was in 2012. Today, Shaheen Bagh has progressed to a peaceful coexistence where the affluent and the poor often live cheek-by-jowl. It is not uncommon to find an upper-middle class family and its retinue of

servants, drivers, maids and cleaners living down the same road. Then, there are small traders and businessmen hailing from towns of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who would have come here with almost zero capital, but scaled their way up. For them, Shaheen Bagh, while opening a window of opportunity in the national capital, also provides a taste of home: similar food, familiar people, mosques, etc. It brings about a certain degree of social equality and compassion not found in very many other places. The fact that men stand together while praying in a mosque helps. Equally, women gather for religious congregations across the class barriers.

That at the protest site one often found the owner of the house and her maid sitting at the same place was not an aberration. It stemmed from mutual respect and appreciation. There was easy acceptance of the others. Both the women, from different spectrums of society, were used to each other's presence in life.

As Prof. Talib put it: 'It is true that Shaheen Bagh is not an affluent area of Delhi yet it could spare its time and material support for organising protest. This may seem ironical on the face of it. The reality is that the majority of residents around Shaheen Bagh belonging mostly to informal sector of society and economy have the required "surplus" borne out of shared experiences of collective life which is not entirely exhausted by the wider productive system. Sociologically speaking, humanity needs a threshold of relative deprivation to produce the extra sociality that is usually missing in areas where the majority may be characterised by high achievers. Perforce, individuals, groups, and institutions heavily integrated in the serious productive frame of society are also depleted of creative resources and alternative visions of humanity required to foster active citizenry. Communities who share among themselves symbolic goods tend to surprise those who observe them from a distance as to what keeps them engaged in a given place and time. The dominant prejudicial environment against the minorities, especially the Muslims has produced enclaves of mutual help and protection to deal with the perceived "danger" which the aggressive negative stereotyping in the wider society produces.'

The brave women of Shaheen Bagh demolished many a negative stereotype.

Notes

1. Anand, A. 2020. 'Lipstick—an Iron Will—under my Burqa'. *Sabrang*, 13 January. Available at: <https://www.sabrangindia.in/article/lipstick-and-iron-will-under-my-burqa?fbclid=IwAR3UowbUQp5CLfDk76ykaokMwdKjBMGk0eQsBiqI0GU5N-HIpucxzJNoFI> (accessed on 15 April 2020).
2. Gayer, L. and Jaffrelot, C. 2012. *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*. Noida: HarperCollins, p. 223.

Confident of Their Muslim Identity

During the election campaign to Jharkhand Vidhan Sabha in December 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed the protestors could be recognised by their clothes. The interpretation by many was that he was referring to anti-CAA protestors, those wearing burqas and skull caps, women in a veil, men with a beard, a stereotypical depiction of Muslims. Except that this time the community took it upon itself to give him and others a reality check.

Yes, many of those fighting against the new laws were Muslims, but they were not apologetic to be Muslims. They understood that in the secular Constitution for which they were fighting, they had as much space as any other religion or community. They had a right to be heard and to be seen. They had a right to stand up for the Constitution of India just as they had a right to be Muslims. You could be a Muslim, a practising Muslim, an obvious Muslim with a beard or a hijab, equally you could be a patriotic Muslim, one who respects the tricolour and the national anthem, and fights for the idea of India as enshrined in our Constitution. The Shaheen Bagh women sprang the biggest surprise here. Not only did they leave the confines of their homes to protest, they were confident of their unique Muslim-ness, and their more popular status as Indian Muslims.

The venue presented a heart-warming sight of women in traditional black burqas waving the tricolour or little girls with the tricolour painted on their cheeks, holding on to the finger of their burqa-wearing mother or their bearded father. It was okay to be seen as an Indian Muslim. To accommodate diverse views, one did not have to tone down one's personal identity. The Shaheen Bagh women wore their burqas, carried their prayer mats to the protest site, offered prayers there, often individually, at times even collectively. They did not shy away from their religious identity. It did not come in the way of expression of their Indian identity either. The venue presented a unique spectacle of girls wearing a tricolour wristband even as they joined their hands in namaz or daily prayers. Many could be seen

carrying copies of the Constitution in their hands and the Quran in their mobiles. One moment they would be singing ‘Saare jahan se achcha Hindustan hamara’, next moment starting their prayers with ‘Allah-o-Akbar’. One even found hundreds of middle-aged women, some covered in black burqas, others wearing colourful salwar–kameez–dupatta, standing up for the national anthem ‘Jana Gana Mana’ many times in the same evening, the evening they would have prostrated before the Almighty in at least two prayer sessions. Then, at night, many would lie down in the same pandal. They would wrap themselves in blankets, keep their prayer mats on one side and go to sleep with the national flag by their side. It was okay to be a Muslim and fighting for the soul of India. It reminded a few history students of what they had read about the Khilafat movement during our freedom struggle. It was fine to wear a cap, raise a slogan for Caliphate one moment, a slogan against the British the next.

The Shaheen Bagh women though did not bring only their manifest religiosity to the protest. Besides hundreds of women of different faiths, they brought with them a whiff of Muslim culture of North India, their language, their poetry, their attire. With their coloured salwar–kameez, glass bangles, often henna-soaked hands, they pretty much took the Muslim attire and shringar (adornment) to the public domain. Add to that their numerous Urdu poetry sessions where they taunted the authorities by reciting or singing the poems of Muhammad Iqbal, Habib Jalib and the Faiz Ahmad Faiz. As Shaheen Bagh women sang ‘Hum Dekhenge’, the nazm of Faiz took wings of its own and found home with thousands of protestors across the country. So powerful was its rendition by protestors that IIT Kanpur was initially reported to have ordered an inquiry if it was anti-Hindu! Later, when the media turned on the heat, the authorities claimed they were only investigating the social media messages of their students. The fortnightly *Frontline* said:

More than 35 years after his death in 1984, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the Pakistani Marxist poet, has become the toast of India. From Delhi to Ahmedabad, Mumbai to Kolkata, Kerala to Bihar, Faiz is on everybody’s lips. More accurately, his poem titled ‘Hum dekhenge’ has become the anthem of the resistance to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)... Faiz is part of a collective heritage, a shared past, according to the protesters. Every evening, often with candles in hand, they sing ‘Hum dekhenge’. There are no musicians

or trained vocalists, it is just the mood of the moment that drives them. Members of the right wing insisted that ‘Hum dekhenge’ hurt their sentiments. They referred particularly to the lines: ‘Jab arz-e-khuda ke kaabe se/Sab but uthwaye jaenge’ and ‘Bas naam rahega Allah ka’.

Vashi Sharma, an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) professor, sought a ban on the poem, arguing that ‘Bas naam rahega Allah ka’ hurt his sentiments. He filed a complaint against students reciting the poem at the protests. When Faiz referred to ‘but’, he was referring to dictators rather than idols.

Before the gravity of the moment could strike the protesters, IIT Kanpur issued instructions for a probe into the poem as the students on the campus recited it as part of their anti-CAA protests.

The poet Javed Akhtar said: ‘Those asking for a ban on the poem do not know Urdu or the tradition of Urdu poetry. They have no idea about the circumstances in which Faiz composed “Hum dekhenge”. The poem was an act of resistance against an autocratic ruler.’

The film-maker Vishal Bharadwaj scoffed at the demand to ban the recitation of the poem at protests. ‘To understand the poetry, you need to feel it first. You need a certain standard of emotional intelligence which seems to be completely lacking in those who are interpreting it as pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu.’

Following outrage among students and the teaching community, IIT Kanpur clarified that it was not investigating whether ‘Hum dekhenge’ was an anti-national poem or a communal one. Rather, the focus of the probe was on the students and their posts in social media. ‘The committee is looking into several complaints of inflammatory actions/posts and will decide if there was a deliberate attempt to disturb the harmony at the institute,’ the institute said.¹

That they sang Faiz, Jalib and Iqbal, while holding candles in one hand and the beloved tricolour in the other, was as strong a statement as one could hope to see or hear; the only parallel being provided by women doing likewise on the staircase of Jama Masjid. But then Shaheen Bagh women were the inspiration for the Jama Masjid women, and millions of others. Unannounced, they presented the nation with a counter to the hegemonistic Hindutva discourse. India was all about diversity. The Constitution told us to respect all religions. The Shaheen Bagh reminded the nation, not subtly, but loudly and consistently—it is both possible and likely to be a Muslim and a patriot. It is okay to be a woman and be at the vanguard of a movement to protect the Constitution of India. And to think that the Shaheen Bagh women accomplished all this at a time when the community

itself was being pushed to the margins by the ruling dispensation, and shunned even by the so-called secular parties! Not to forget their status in the patriarchal Muslim society like most others. As noted academic and critic Apoorvanand wrote in *The Indian Express*:

Muslims, who were being cornered and pushed to the margins by the BJP and shunned by the secular parties, have found in these protests a moment to assert their right of equality and dignity in their land..., the Muslim perseverance has forced political parties to shed their ambiguity towards them. Even NDA partners have spoken out against the CAA and NRC. The Congress, which wanted to wipe out the 'blot' of pro-Muslimness, is in the process of discovering the old Gandhi–Nehruvian secular resolve. Its resolution rejecting NPR shows that it is firming up its stance. The message now should go down the ranks.

This moment is a great opportunity for both the students and Muslims to provide leadership. It holds immense potential in creating a new language of togetherness and empathy. Sadbhavna or goodwill, as the founding principle of any collective action, can be foregrounded. Hindu–Muslim unity, the first article of the constructive programme of Gandhi, should be the objective if the present phase of protests have to mutate into a movement of civic and shared nationalism. If religion still remains a source of transcendence from one's narrow existence, then why not revive Sarva Dharma Prarthana on a national scale? We have seen churches opening up to Muslims. Why not a similar gesture from Hindu temples and gurudwaras and places of worship of other religions?²

With such positive debates entering public discourse, the Shaheen Bagh women had indeed become agents of change. And scoffed at those who alleged they were not using their wisdom or they were being shepherded by their men. Prof. Talib analysed: 'The enclave of Shaheen Bagh produces tremendous psychological boost to stand up-front in relation to the symbolic and material cultural possessions without feeling shy or ashamed about it. So much so that the unique symbols got merged with the nationalist symbols seamlessly. Not just the religious with the secular, but specifically religious with diversely religious. This could happen in so far as the nationalist symbols too were reduced to a minority status as the Constitution and nation's Parliament got sidelined under pressure of a dictating majority. The reverse logic of being pushed into the weakest

moment is to confront fear through collective mobilisation and solidarities. The fear the minorities face is not imaginary. There is almost a shameless parade of its real basis in examples of violence to life and property witnessed in the wake of recent protests.’

But then it is not always a disadvantage to be thrown into a hell hole of violent prejudices and life-diminishing discrimination, as these, through an existential buoyance, reactivate what was partially paralysed and forgotten. The experience of Shaheen Bagh women, hailing from diverse backgrounds, was about salvaging what was forcibly marginalised in memory and practical life.

What explains the endurance of Shaheen Bagh as a demonstration over the weeks was its excessive production of what anthropologists writing about religious rituals and social celebrations call ‘communitas’—an anti-structure characterised by an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity and togetherness. Add to that the Muslim fragrance. Or as Prof. Avijit Pathak discovered: ‘At Shaheen Bagh, there was a noble surprise: a therapeutic moment. We saw Muslim women overcoming the psychology of fear that emanated from two sources: (a) the meaning of being part of the minority community in the age of triumphant majoritarianism; and (b) the meaning of being a woman in a patriarchal society that is also celebrating militarism and hyper-masculine nationalism.’

Writing on similar lines was Irena Akbar who took part in the protests in Lucknow where women, inspired by Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh, transformed Ghanta Ghar into their Shaheen Bagh. She wrote in *The Indian Express*:

When I protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act at Parivartan Chowk in Lucknow on December 19, I did not protest just against the legislation. That was the obvious, immediate protest.

There was another unspoken, more passionate protest happening within the hearts of Muslims like me who had assembled at Parivartan Chowk. It was a protest against six long years of the anti-Muslim agenda of the Narendra Modi government. It was a protest against the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq, Pehlu Khan, Tabrez Ansari, Junaid Khan, and many others whose names have been forgotten. It was a protest against the passing of the Triple Talaq Bill. It was a protest against the Supreme Court verdict in the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi title suit. It was a protest against the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Finally, it was a protest against the trigger that

pushed us out on the streets—the Delhi Police’s crackdown on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia. It was a cumulative protest, a release of pent-up anguish over the relentless anti-Muslim agenda of the state and the media since 2014.³

The ‘cumulative protest’ was notable for the Muslim community bringing its own distinct feel, culture and language to the stir. Urdu, for long albeit erroneously associated with the largest minority, was used without any second thoughts of the protests being labelled. The women who made space for a Hindu funeral procession or sat in a havan (a Hindu fire ceremony) organised at Shaheen Bagh were equally confident of their Muslim identity. They were Indian Muslims, take it or leave it, was their sharp message. They had not had the collective strength to hit the roads when Muslim men were lynched 2015 onwards, unlike the Dalit brothers who led a 200-kilometre-long march when four Dalit men were stripped to their waist and flogged in public in Una, Gujarat, in 2016. Now it was the Muslim society’s turn to speak up. Irena Akbar commented in the same piece in *The Indian Express*:

When agenda is written into law, the ‘wisdom’ of not resisting won’t save you. When you are pushed to the wall, you can’t be pushed further. You must rise back. So, after six years of patience despite repeated provocations, Muslims began rallying across cities in large numbers, holding placards against CAA–NRC. The protests allegedly turned ‘violent’ in BJP-ruled UP and Karnataka, giving an excuse to the police to crack down on protesters. The fear of such a crackdown was the precise reason for Muslims not protesting in Modi’s first term. But one has to rise above fear, and sadly, pay the price for active resistance.

Many non-Muslims, too, are participating in the active resistance and calling for ‘azadi’ from Hindutva. Some, though, have expressed discomfort with Muslim protestors chanting distinctly Islamic slogans like ‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is Great) and ‘La ilaha illallah’ (There is no God but Allah). Shashi Tharoor, for example, tweeted: ‘You can’t fight Hindutva communalism by promoting Muslim communalism. Identity politics will destroy India.’

If Muslims are asserting their religious identity with their religious slogans, it is because they have been targeted on account of their religion. If the state wants to bully me because of my faith, I will only publicly assert it. Hannah Arendt, the Jewish political philosopher who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, wrote, ‘If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man.’ A

democracy allows you to protest from your standpoint. An unaffected majority can protest solely as an Indian. An affected minority has the right to protest as an Indian and as a minority.⁴

The intention in asserting the Muslim identity, as Nizam Pasha said,

is not to communalise and colour what is quintessentially a pan-India people's movement as a Muslim movement. It is only to emphasise that for the first time since independence, Muslims have emerged on to the streets to raise their voice and claim an equal share in the political discourse of their country ... there is a reaffirmation of their Muslim identity by the Muslim protesters. Protests are paused for *namaz*, and non-Muslim protestors form human chains around the people offering prayers. *Duas* (prayers) for a roll-back of the discriminatory law are being conducted after *namaz* in mosques. *Rozas* (fasts) have been observed in various places as a statement of solidarity with the fight against NRC–CAA–NPR and community iftars are being organised.⁵

Maybe, it is time then for a million Shaheen Baghs!

Notes

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4. Ibid.
5. Pasha, N. 'For the First Time Since Independence, Muslims Have Emerged on to the Streets'. *The Wire*, 4 January. Available at: <https://thewire.in/rights/anti-cao-nrc-npr-protests-muslims> (accessed on 15 April 2020).

Bonds across Religion and Regions

The date 19 January is observed as the exodus day, the day when thousands of Kashmiri families fled Kashmir in 1990 in the face of threats of rape, pillage and murder. According to the Indian government, more than 62,000 families are registered as Kashmir refugees, including some Sikh and Muslim families. On 19 January 2020, the Shaheen Bagh women surprised even the most ardent of their supporters by inviting Kashmiri Pandits to address them. It shocked many as the Pandits were believed to be in favour of both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the CAA. However, the women, largely Muslim, invited the Kashmiri Pandits as fellow minorities. The protestors were minorities at the national level, the Pandits at the state level. They understood the pain of fellow minorities in the face of rampant majoritarianism.

The women raised their voice for the return of Kashmiri brethren to their homeland. It was probably the first occasion when a non-political group had decided to support the return of Kashmiri Pandits to their homeland from a public platform. The political parties too, including the ruling BJP, had only paid lip service to their possible return, without actively working towards it. Thus, when the Shaheen Bagh women extended an invitation to Kashmiri Pandits, it marked a new beginning towards a nation where a section of citizenry empathised with another purely on the basis of sense of displacement or possible dispossession.

The widely respected theatre director M.K. Raina was invited to address the gathering from the stage. Keeping him company was performance artist Inder Salim. With their mere presence among the Shaheen Bagh women, the protestors proved that the fight was no longer about CAA alone, it was a struggle for a united India overcoming division of politics, region and religion. In fact, so thrilled was Raina with his experience of the protest, he stated in a conversation with Ziya Us Salam, the co-author: 'It was a fabulous experience. I discovered that it is Shaheen Bagh which is India. There are communities and communities there, not just Muslim women. It

is phenomenal. One finds hope there, something that I have not found in independent India in non-political gatherings. I was sitting with them for hours, and all that the women did was to talk of “Ain, ain, ain” (Urdu for Constitution). The way they rallied behind the tricolour is to be seen to be believed. It is the best thing that has happened to India. A totally non-partisan, non-political exhibition of patriotism. With their protest, they marginalised the maulanas, even silenced the trolling parties. Look at the trolls now. They have all gone silent. The women drowned them out completely. They responded to filmmaker Vivek Agnihotri’s allegation that they were celebrating the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits by exposing it as a lie. I spoke from the stage, and all of them listened intently. Not once did they make me feel like an outsider. The idea of observing exodus day was that as the minorities they understand our tragedy. That day it was the minorities talking of other minorities, to other minorities. They talked of our pain which nobody else has done for thirty years.’

Earlier, he had told *India Today*:

Shaheen Bagh is one of the biggest Gandhian Satyagrah post Independence. This kind of sporadic movement is unprecedented in India. This is a movement which will give a new shape to our country. We have been a unique country all the way, and this uniqueness of such huge diversity is threatened by recent turn of events in the country. These protesters are determined to reclaim the idea that was envisioned as India. Their protest is for a democratic and humane India which cannot be undermined by some allegations.... I would like to say that people who suffered persecution for being minority can only understand the pain of protesters who are out there to protest in the chilling cold.

Unfortunately, I have experienced all this myself. I was in Kashmir at the time of exodus and know what it feels to become stateless. I could see in the eyes of my parents, the desire to go back to their homeland and can very much relate that with the pain of Muslim minorities in India. As far as people like Agnihotri and Anupam Kher are concerned, I would believe that their intention is right but [possibly] their approach is not.¹

The Shaheen Bagh women even observed a two-minute silence in solidarity with Kashmiri Pandits.

A little before this unity with the Pandits, the women had some unexpected visitors expressing solidarity with them. They were Sikh gentlemen and women who were members of a farmers’ union from

Punjab. They came in busloads to join the sit-in and also serve community lunch through a langar stall they set up near the protest site. The Sikhs came with lots of wheat, rice, lentils and masalas. They even brought with them large cooking stoves and utensils for running a community kitchen. Their hospitality was immediately reciprocated by the protestors with many women readily helping out their Sikh brothers with the food preparation. Some chopped vegetables, some made dough for chapattis, others made chapattis. The dal–chawal (lentil and rice) the Sikh contingent served the protestors was a welcome change from the constant flow of biryani at the site. In private conversation, many women longed for simple dal–chawal or dal–roti (bread) as they had had enough of biryani, day in, day out, for almost a month. The farmers' union's preparation of simple lentils, rice and mixed vegetable worked as a welcome change. A couple of days later, more Sikhs joined, and the langar stall became pretty popular with both the protestors and the visitors. Unfortunately, after functioning for more than a week, the langar was demolished by the local police following allegations of establishing a food outlet without permission. The Sikhs, however, were not to be denied for long. By the first week of February, another contingent of 400 people arrived at Shaheen Bagh. In fact, announcements had earlier been made in gurdwaras in Punjab asking for volunteers to travel to Shaheen Bagh, and agents came up to guide those keen to travel. Most of the farmers who came to Delhi hailed from Sangrur, Bhatinda and Moga, the regions worst affected by the agrarian crisis in the State. It was the unity of the oppressed against a system that was increasingly resembling a pro-corporate, pro-majority state.

The Punjab farmers did not have things easy. They travelled by eight buses from Punjab to Delhi. First, they were detained a few kilometres from the protest site. They sat on the road in the chill of Delhi till late in the evening. A little before midnight, they were packed off to a gurdwara in Maharani Bagh, about five kilometres from the protest site. Next morning, even as volunteers were trying to arrange help for the Punjab contingent to reach the site, the women protestors proved smarter, and more on the ball. They had prepared an early breakfast of chhole–poori (chickpeas and fried bread) and were soon at the gurdwara ready with the meal! When the contingent arrived, improvised rugs were made for them from flattened cardboard boxes covered with black polythene. Local boys and girls

dropped in to make friends with elderly men with long, white beards. Many brought along dupattas of their mothers and the Sikh gentlemen taught them to make a turban out of it! A photo of an elderly Muslim man tending the feet of an elderly Sikh gentleman went viral! A little before that noted Delhi-based advocate D.S. Bindra sold off his flat to finance langar for the protestors every day! Even as his wife and son ran the langar at other protest sites, notably Khureji and Mustafabad in East Delhi, Bindra stuck around Shaheen Bagh. He served the women here not just lunch and dinner but even tea in between. So impressed was Bindra with the stout resistance put up by the women against draconian laws that he dubbed them 'lionesses'. Truth be told, he himself had exceeded all expectations by selling his property to feed the women on a regular basis, not being cowed down by the police prosecution of his langar utensils one day in mid-January. For a few days, Bindra scaled down his operations, shifted his kitchen to the parking lot. Soon, he was back to full service! If any proof was needed about the growing bonding between minorities, this singular act provided it. As Bindra told the authors, 'Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Isai is not just a slogan but a way of life for Indians'.

However, free food is not the only thing the Sikhs offered. The Sikh women joined the Muslim women at the protest site, raising slogans against NRC, a couple even taking the microphone to express solidarity. They drew their inspiration from Christian nurses from Kerala. More than a dozen nurses turned up in the second week of January and expressed solidarity with the women at the sit-in. In the first week of February, local Christian priests joined in. Around twenty-five Catholic priests from Delhi led by Presentation Sister Anastasia Gill joined the protestors. 'The Christian community rejects CAA as this piece of legislation is against the spirit of the Constitution of India,' said Sister Gill while addressing thousands of women at the protest site. She added, 'As citizens of this great nation, Christians are in solidarity with the protesters as they defend the idea of India cherished by the father of our nation Mahatma Gandhiji and Babasaheb Ambedkar.'² The Christian contingent sang 'Abide with me' before singing 'We shall overcome' in Hindi as 'Hum honge kamyab'.

The Shaheen Bagh women soaked it all in, grateful for the support. However, they knew a section of the media was still portraying the anti-

CAA protests as merely the protest by a particular community against the government. They knew they could not control the media. No matter what they said, a section of the media insisted on showing the opposite. For this section, a protest against CAA was an act against the nation. And the women at protest were just dummies used by men who hid behind them! It was disrespectful to the integrity of the movement, and the guts and gumption of the women. It rankled them that the media insisted on portraying them as weak beings who were unable to use their brains or powers of discernment. They kept their counsel, even as they picked and chose the media personnel they would trust. Meanwhile, they sent out a message to the nation loud and clear: The Shaheen Bagh protest was being led by women, most of whom were Muslims, but it was a protest not for safeguarding a community's interest but that of the nation. To prove as much, one weekend morning they held a havan, conducted by a Hindu priest invited for the occasion. Along with the Hindu priest, a Christian priest read the Bible, a Sikh priest did shabad kirtan and a maulana read the Quran. As far as optics go, it was a brilliant move. For those inclined to go beyond the image, the action went a long way in proving that the movement was endorsed by all sections of Indians. You could oppose their action or the choice of venue for protest, but you could not doubt their intention.

Notes

1. Ashraf, A. 'Shaheen Bagh Protesters Express Solidarity with Kashmiri Pandits on Exodus Day'. *India Today*, New Delhi, 19 January. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kashmiri-pandits-exodusday-migration-refugees-1638294-2020-01-19> (accessed on 15 April 2020).
2. Edwin, V. 2020. 'Catholic Religious Support Shaheen Bagh's Women Protesters'. *Matters India*, New Delhi, 4 February. Available at: <http://mattersindia.com/2020/02/catholic-religious-support-shaheen-baghs-women-protesters/> (accessed on 15 April 2020).

A Night Out at Shaheen Bagh

A hint of a fresh dawn was in the air. There was a rose-pink line to an ash-grey sky, as if conveying a bit of hope in times dark and despondent. The birds, though largely silent, could be seen hopping from one branch of a tree to another; the crow was an exception. As was the rooster that insisted on waking up everybody. Turned out, a family close by had kept roosters and hens as pets, and the rooster climbed on to the wall every morning to issue a call from there. The women though ignored the call, most were half asleep, some half a dozen snored loudly. Many rested their heads on shawls folded into many-layered rectangles. It was the best they could do to protect their head from the bone-chilling cold of the road. A durrie is all that most had under their weather-beaten bodies all night. In the stillness of almost dawn, the prayer call pierced through from a mosque. ‘Allah-u-Akbar, Allah-u-Akbar...’ Slowly, even reluctantly, women willed themselves into motion. ‘La ilaha illallahu...’, they recited; many yawned loudly, uninhibitedly.

Quietly, they moved towards a nursing home whose toilet had been used by many protestors since the day women went ahead with their decision for a sit-in. After a quick ablution, they offered their Fajr prayer. Everybody did it individually. It did not strike them that they could have done it collectively in the pandal. Years of performing individual prayers were hard to shake off, and most women found it comfortable to pray at their own speed, in their own comfort zone.

This though was the only moment they succumbed to tradition. Till late into the night, the women were awake, listening to speakers. They maintained their attention even when many speakers repeated the dangers of new laws and policies. The women had heard it all over the past few weeks, but still heard out the speakers, hoping to glean something from the talk. There was one moment though when everything came to a standstill, when all phones stopped buzzing, when all accompanying activities, including the sound of a steel ladle beating a tikki-chat (a fried potato

snack) round tray went silent. This was the moment the women had been promised early in the evening. As a result, even women who normally went home around midnight decided to stay on for the night. Such was the charm, so great was the attraction. When the speaker finally arrived, it was around 11.30 in the night. At first, the women failed to notice him as he just hung around the fringes where scores of other men stood, some to help out the women in case they needed anything, most to listen to the speeches delivered from the stages. When this much-awaited speaker reached the side of the pandal, everything stayed calm and usual. It was biting cold of Delhi winters, and he was dressed the 'aam aadmi' (common man) way. He wore a sweater and a sleeveless jacket. He had a muffler which he used to wrap around his neck and face. Only his eyes were visible. When the hostess announced from stage that he was amidst the protestors, many women looked around to catch a glimpse of the speaker. They failed to notice him. Even when he came on stage where he stood in front of the iconography of Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad, Bhagat Singh and Dr. Ambedkar, most protestors could not recognise him, as his face was largely covered by the muffler. It was when he removed his muffler to say 'salam' to Shaheen Bagh women that the evening came to life, and protestors suddenly became cheerful, even vociferous, with women letting out screams nobody had thought them capable of!

He was the much-admired, the hugely popular Kanhaiya Kumar, very much the darling of the Shaheen Bagh crowd. His unquestioned acceptance by all the women said a lot about the openness of the crowd to all leaders, including somebody as young as Kanhaiya. When he spoke, the women refused to take any calls, many decided to record the moment for posterity. They responded enthusiastically to his calls for unity, answering his words, 'Hum sab...' (We all) with 'ek hain' (are one). When he spoke of azadi from fear, from communalism, from dictatorship, from corruption, the women nodded along, some clapped, a few even got up on their feet to applaud in the middle of his sentences. For those few moments, Kanhaiya could as well have been more popular than anybody in the country for the protestors. His worth though could be gauged only after he left the premises. By the time he had gone back, it was well past midnight, but the women were not ready to sleep. They decided to analyse his words threadbare; many were clearly besotted with the young man. 'He will go far', was the unanimous

verdict. The grannies confined themselves to saying, ‘Honhar beta hai (He is a talented son). We need such young men, not somebody who discriminates between one individual and another on the basis of religion. But then, what else do you expect? When he was studying in JNU, he was jailed. Does he look like a terrorist?’

The Kanhaiya show brought to an end an evening that had begun promisingly with the group rendition of Jalib’s ‘Main nahin manta’ (I don’t accept). The women had sung it a few times before going to the timeless ‘Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil mein hai’. Of course, between rounds of tea, served with great patience and skill by the boys at the protest, they took time out to do their own individual things. Some helped their kids with homework, some attended to a sweater they were knitting. A few of them listened only to the speeches made from the stage. They welcomed each new speaker with a round of applause and answered each Inquilaab (revolution) with a Zindabad (long live). Their enthusiasm did not wane when more than one speaker decided to end his talk with a rendition of ‘Jana Gana Mana’. Even the grandmothers mustered up all their energy to stand for the national anthem one more time. A little later, eighty-two-year-old Bilquis found time to tell co-author Uzma Ausaf, ‘I have never missed a single prayer in my life. I have faith in the Almighty. We have lived like brothers and sisters in this country. Nothing can divide us. We shall overcome.’

By the time the women were through with all the speakers for the day, and their own consequent analysis of the main speeches, the date on the calendar had changed. Many stayed awake, just in case any untoward incident took place. Others retired. The women who stayed awake decided to take a round of the premises, curious to see any new artworks that might have been put up. Many read the graffiti on the walls loudly and approvingly. Even as they looked around for a paan shop in the vicinity, some dogs barked, some cats ran across silently towards restaurants now disposing off the chicken left over on the plates. Meanwhile, the grandmothers slept closest to the stage, iconography of freedom fighters behind their heads, little paper flags of India on their right and left, and the rest of the crowd sprawled at their feet. Most women just lay down wherever they could find space, folding up their shawls to make an impromptu pillow, and covered themselves with a blanket. For a man from

a distance, they could well be taking an afternoon nap in winters, except it was in the wee hours of the night and the temperature was in single degrees! Even the Delhi Metro had fallen silent.

One group though stayed awake all night. They were the unsung young men of Shaheen Bagh, boys in their twenties, some even younger, who stayed on their feet all night to ensure no criminal elements could sneak into the protest, that the women stayed safe, and the dawn arrived without any chaos. All days they succeeded. Like the day the women woke up after the Kanhaiya dream.

A little after the Fajr prayers, it was time for change of guard. Women with little children, those going to school, headed home. They had to prepare them for school, get their breakfast ready. The grandmothers and those with grown-up children stayed back. When the first batch of women was back after attending to domestic duties—most would have prepared breakfast and lunch for their children and husband, swept and cleaned the house, and even put clothes in the washing machine—the other batch was ready to go. It was their turn to look after the house for a few hours. All along, the grandmothers stayed on. Most went back only twice a week to bathe and change into new clothes. That too only for a couple of hours. Otherwise, the Shaheen Bagh protest site, which kept Noida commuters away from Faridabad counterparts for weeks on end, was their home. Every night, every morning, from dawn to dusk and beyond.

Flow of Poetry and Music



Slogans talked of a revolution under way at the site.

For all their patience and perseverance, it would have been extremely difficult for the women protestors to sit cross-legged for long hours for days on end. The back would have ached after some time; the knees would have got wobbly. Even the head would have spun. Not to ignore the prolonged winter chill. That they overcame all challenges was largely due to their commitment to the cause, but aided at least partially by the constant flow of poetry and music at the site. When the women sang along with the host on stage, or when they listened to somebody like Shubha Mudgal or T.M. Krishna, it would have helped assuage frayed nerves.

It started with an interesting mix of poetry for a cause. The women were taught on the first couple of days by youngsters from Jamia Millia Islamia to repeat noted lyricist Varun Grover's 'Kaagaz nahin dikhaenge'. Gradually, this became an anthem of sorts for the resistance protest. As Grover himself tweeted: 'It was inspired by the spirit of every protestor and India-lover. With hat-tips to Rahat Indori Saab and the Bangla slogans.' The work of Rahat Indori himself was recited by many a speaker with the audiences warming up to 'Sabhi ka khoon hai shamil is mitti mein, kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai' (Everybody's blood is added to this land, India does not belong to anybody's father). The Shaheen Bagh women sang along to this nazm so often that noted actor and BJP politician Paresh Rawal felt compelled to ask, 'Nobody is saying India belongs to your father. The question is, does your father belong to India?'

His remark was answered soundly by the oldest protestor, the ninety-year-old Asma Khatoon, who for the umpteenth time reeled out the names of nine generations of her family members, then asked aloud, 'Can he do the same?' Such was the spirit, so enviable was the wit.

Indori's though was not the only nazm to be recited almost every day, helping keep ennui at bay on enervating afternoons. A special place was made for Habib Jalib. His 'Dastoor' was sung with such gusto and frequency that one wondered where had the nazm been all these years at all other protests. To give credit where it is due, 'Dastoor' was revived by the students of JNU who identified with this resistance poetry. A video of JNU students singing 'Main nahin manta' went viral. Suddenly, the nazm about the oppressor and the determination of the oppressed to overcome it was on everybody's lips. The Shaheen Bagh women picked it up too, identifying with the subject of oppression and exploitation. Their particular favourite was Shashibhushan Samad, a JNU student who had sung the nazm in a video that went viral. *The Indian Express* reported:

At New Delhi's Shaheen Bagh hundreds of women are on a sit-in against the CAA and NRC for over a fortnight now, Shashibhushan Samad of the Jawaharlal Nehru University wasn't allowed to leave the dais without singing *Dastoor* last week. Samad's recital of the Pakistani poet's poem on the steps of JNU, when the university students were protesting a hike in hostel fee among other things, had gone viral months ago. And ever since, the powerful critique of the anti-poor constitution, introduced in the regime of Pakistan's first

military dictator General Ayub Khan, has found much resonance on this side of the border. It is ironic but it is mostly Pakistani poets—Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Jalib, and Allama Iqbal—whose language of resistance and dissent are inspiring the youth protesting against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act across the country.

In 1962, Ayub Khan's constitution enforced in Pakistan an indirect election of an executive president through an electoral college, instead of direct democracy. Calling out the farce, Jalib wrote *Dastoor* in response, which adequately vented the political frustration of the ordinary Pakistani. The poet sang it openly, at various public gatherings and stages. The poem attained the status of an anthem, and very often people would join Jalib when he recited it.

Dastoor is now being sung by the youth in India, and its verses—*Aise dastoor ko, Subhe-be-noor ko/ Main nahin maanta, Main nahin jaanta* (This system, this morning bereft of light/ I refuse to accept, I refuse to acknowledge)—are being flashed on posters. Significantly, while *Dastoor* has often featured at *mushairas* in India, it is perhaps for the first time that it has become such a big part of the popular protests here.¹

There was close competition between 'Dastoor' and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's 'Hum Dekhenge' for the slot of the most popular poetry at the protest. Much like 'Dastoor', 'Hum Dekhenge' is resistance poetry, and it struck an immediate chord with the protestors. The nazm, again from Pakistan, hit the headlines when civil society activists identified with it during their prolonged fight with General Zia-ul-Haq. In India it caught the public eye with the anti-CAA protests. While T.M. Krishna gave it his own form by singing it in four languages—Hindustani, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu—the nazm was sung on a regular basis by the women themselves with even little girls trying their hand at it. They would sing, 'Hum dekhenge lazim hai ke hum bhi dekhenge/ Wo din ke jis ka wada hai/ Jab zulm-o-sitam ke koh-e-garan Rooi ki tarrah ur jayenge/Hum mehkoomom ke paaon tale Ye dharti dhar dharkegi' (We shall see, certainly we, too, shall see/ That day that has been promised to us/ When these high mountains of tyranny and oppression turn to fluff and evaporate/ And we oppressed beneath our feet will this earth shiver, shake and beat).

It is not only poetry from Pakistan that kept the spirits high at Shaheen Bagh. The women loved the poetry of Imran Pratapgarhi too. And just in case they needed some easy laughs, there was Kunal Kamra with his very biting satire. He came in after the protests had continued unabated for five weeks, and said, 'I had not come prepared to talk here. But the government

has been more unprepared when it comes to CAA. “Sadko par karva ke danga ji, Modi says sab changa si” [After engineering riots on the roads, Modiji says all is well]. Ask Amit Shah, do you love Indian Muslims as much as you do Pakistani Hindus or not? The BJP is not only against Muslims, it is anti-India. They have a problem with the idea of India.’ The audience lapped up every word of Kamra, responding with claps and whistles.

Then, one fine evening came Shubha Mudgal. It was something nobody had imagined. More so at a time when most classical artists as also popular stars of Hindi cinema had kept themselves away from anti-CAA protests. Not so with Shubha Mudgal who performed at Shaheen Bagh on 4 February 2020, leaving in her trails requests for an encore. She too sang ‘Hum Dekhenge’.

Incidentally, Mudgal and other artists stepped in to extend a safety ring of sorts over the protestors. It started soon after a student of Jamia had been shot by a goon on the same date as Mahatma’s martyrdom, 30 January; it was soon followed by a man firing in the air at Shaheen Bagh before being nabbed by the police. A little after that, some members claiming to be from the RSS threatened to destroy the pandal at the protest and drive the women away. All the attempts were foiled either by protestors or the alertness of the police. However, the danger lurked as elections to Delhi assembly approached. At such a time, in stepped the artists with their message of peace. Hoping that their presence would dissuade any possible attacks, the artists started performing every day at Shaheen Bagh. Realising the gravity of the situation, Kusha Kapila, a popular comedy sketch performer, messaged her friends: ‘I wish all of you could come to Shaheen Bagh. It’s something else. It’s the most incredible place. It’s definitely a bit intimidating at first, if you are not used to establishments like these, but it’s safe. Everyone genuinely intently listens to people on stage. They sing. The vibe is of a get-together really.’

The Wire reported:

Kapila was the opening act of a spontaneous festival, ‘Artists Against Communalism’, begun as a precaution against attacks, and an antidote to the political slander against Shaheen Bagh. It opened on February 2, the date on

which a right-wing gang had promised to unleash violence on the women-led 24×7 protest. It will continue until February 8, the date of the Delhi polls, as BJP politicians—including the prime minister—demonise the peaceful protest as the main thrust of their campaign...’ The shooting at Jamia by the right-wing terrorist had everyone shaken,” said Saba Grewal. She is better known as Saba Azad, or Mink, her stage-name in the electro-funk duo Madboy Mink. “And Shaheen Bagh had been getting constant threats. So—literally overnight—a call was taken to come to this with music and with art, and artists rose to the occasion.²

The Shaheen Bagh women deserved every bit of it.

Notes

1. Rahman, S. 2020. ‘Habib Jalib, his Dastoor—Why the People’s Poet and his Verse are Inspiring India’s Youth’. *The Indian Express*, 2 January. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/habib-jalib-his-dastoor-why-the-peoples-poet-and-his-verse-are-inspiring-indias-youth-6194746/> (accessed on 15 April 2020).
2. *The Wire*. ‘Stars and Artists Line Up for Spontaneous Festival at Shaheen Bagh’. *The Wire*, 4 February. Available at: <https://thewire.in/rights/stars-artists-cao-protest-shaheen-bagh-festival> (accessed on 15 April 2020).

A Library at the Bus Stop, an Art Gallery across the Bridge



The protestors remembered the participants everywhere with a unique photo exhibition put up on the bridge.

Across the side bar of the Shaheen Bagh foot overbridge, there is a slogan 'A revolution has begun'. On the other side of the bridge, the staircase has a lovely message scribbled across its steps, 'A nation that stays united is the nation that progresses'. Since the Shaheen Bagh protests began on 15 December, the cyan bridge has attracted fewer passers-by than art lovers. A few steps on to the bridge, and one knows why. With the place being virtually closed to vehicular traffic, pedestrians have the road, the pavement, the bridge all to themselves. Unlike any bridge in the city, this one has no 'Raju loves Indu' graffiti. Rather, it is replete with art works,

mostly done in art competitions, some seemingly put together in a hurry. Some take a dig at the prime minister and the home minister and their alleged statements about recognising the protestors with their clothes, and there being a chronology of CAA–NPR–NRC. A painting of a woman with a tricolour wrapped around like a hijab, and a bindi on her forehead, challenges, ‘Now recognise with the clothes’. Another hanging shows a photograph of Shah as the art, and that of the Jamia shooter as the artwork! If there were prizes for derring-do, the unsung artists of Shaheen Bagh would have won hands down.

The works display a bit of internationalism, a bit of feminism and a melting pot of ideology. Take, for instance, a casually scribbled work in saffron that hangs by a string. Ostensibly penned by a woman, it is inspired by Jalib’s ‘Main nahin manta’. Here the artist, pointing to a lotus in full bloom, says, ‘Is khile hue phool ko main nahin manti’ (I do not accept this flower in full bloom). Next to it, another work against a green background this time, hails revolution across castes and nations with the words, ‘Jai Bheem, Laal Salaam, Viva La Revolution!’ Till mid-December 2019, nobody would have suspected the residents of this area of having such proclivities. Like many other preconceived notions, this too was thrown into the Yamuna that flows quietly, almost laboriously, in the neighbourhood. The area has been known for its kabab–biryani–nahari culture, only yielding space to occasional talks around Jamaat-e-Islami Hind whose headquarters are in the vicinity. Rarely does any university other than Jamia Millia Islamia figure in social conversations here. It is a place ignored by political and social scientists, not many ever suspected the residents of nursing a spine to try to change the law of the land, new or old. But once Shaheen Bagh led the way for protestors across the country, it found its inner voice, and called upon hidden reservoirs of artistic talent and poetic inclination to paint the world in colours of defiance.

The best example comes from a little white tent that has made its presence felt barely a few metres behind the pandal. In an interesting mix of Hindi and English, the artist–poet declares, ‘Ek dharm ke log ghushpethiye (People of one religion are infiltrators), Baqi dharm ke log sharanarhi (People from rest of the religions are refugees); if this isn’t religious discrimination, we don’t know what else is.’ Of course, the message is headlined, ‘Inquilaab’ (Revolution). Truly, in Shaheen Bagh a revolution is

underway. It is reinforced with a little artwork displayed just outside the protest shrine. It says, ‘Sorry for the inconvenience. Women at work. We are giving birth to a new nation. Please bear with us.’ The placard was put up in response to complaints of motorists struggling to reach Noida because the protestors sat right across the road.

Their creative zeal does not end there. The protestors even managed to build a metallic detention centre, placed right behind the protest site. Inside it photographs of Maulana Azad and Bhagat Singh are hung, outside it that of Dr. Ambedkar. One cold weekend, one middle-aged man stood inside it clad in nothing but his drawers. He wore a prisoner’s ring around his neck and shackles around his wrists. Fittingly, a woman protestor commented, ‘We are not moving from here until the CAA is repealed. It is difficult to sit here every day in this cold but the alternative is to sit in a detention centre a few years later. Better to brave it out now in the protest than to rot in a detention centre or be called a “ghuspetiya” in your own country.’

With such sentiments, the protestors have managed to spring another surprise—a temporary library, fittingly though predictably called Fatima Sheikh–Savitribai Phule Library. The name is an attempt to project the inclusive nature of the protest, often reduced to a protest by Muslim women in the eyes of some. It is also an attempt to tell the world that the suffering of women remains the same, whether they are called Fatima or Savitribai! The library is built in what is actually a bus stop for the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses. Here, one can sit on the metallic bench placed by DTC for the use of commuters, which acts as a reading bench. Many prefer to pick up a book and sit here to read. With gentle winter sunshine, it is quite a place to read a book without being disturbed. Else, one can sit on the floor where a rug is spread for book lovers. Many pick up a book, stretch their legs even as they rest against the wall. A few just sit on the pavement, with many picking up a book out of sheer curiosity. It is, however, in the choice of books that one finds the organisers making a statement. Amidst scores of biographies, there is none of Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has been the subject of dozens of books fawning over him in the past six years. Here, there are no takers for Modi. Failing to find takers too is a new book on Amit Shah. There is a copy of *Mein Kampf* of Hitler. It interests many. There is another book on Hitler. There is space for Mahatma Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth* as also A.P.J. Abdul Kalam’s *My*

Journey. Difficult to ignore are two copies of *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography*. With these, there is Tariq Ali's *The Nehrus and the Gandhis*. Most interesting is the presence of George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Their presence tells us that the women here do read, and not all protestors are semi-literate, old women. Many are young professionals, some are students. They are aware of the challenges confronted by the nation and the community today. It shows in the kind of books put up for free reading.

Keeping company of the usual titles like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, again, are two titles crying for attention—one is Hasan Suroor's *India's Muslim Spring*, the other being copies of the Indian Constitution. The message of the two books being unequivocal: Indian Muslims are undergoing a churning, and at such a time, holding on to their dear Constitution. Very much the spirit of many Shaheen Bagh women.

It is, maybe, time for a new beginning. Or time for dreams to take wings. All this is beautifully summed up with a painting of a grandmother of Shaheen Bagh sitting with a falcon (shaheen) on her hand. The biggish painting finds space a few yards behind the stage, close to an informal medical camp. A mix of sobering hues, it presents an eloquent mix of an old woman and a young falcon ready to fly off her hand. The years to come will judge how far were the brave women of Shaheen Bagh able to fly.

Grannies Lead the Way



The Shaheen Bagh grannies, Bilquis, Asma Khatoon and Sarwari, attained fame.

Sarwari, Seventy-five

She is easily the most expressive of about a thousand women who sat in protest against the CAA, NRC and NPR. Her silver hair complements her fair complexion and contrasts with her uneven red lips due to long years of chewing paan. At seventy-five, she is the youngest of the famous grannies of Shaheen Bagh who took on the might of the government by hitting the

streets like never before. She has not had any formal schooling. She had never sat in a dharna earlier, never taken part in any political rallies.

‘In our times, girls used to stay indoors. There were very few girls who went to school. Most used to study a little bit at home, and were married off as soon as they came off age [reached puberty]. I also completed the reading of the Quran in my childhood, and studied a little bit of Hadiths, not much. Then I got married. Maybe, I was fifteen–sixteen, I don’t know. It was long ago. Now our prime minister has given the slogan of “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao”. But this is only a slogan. He does not react when girls are beaten by the police, or raped by politicians. We have heard about Unnao and Kathua cases. Tell me, did he speak a single line in defence of girls who were attacked by policemen in Jamia? What was the fault of the students who were studying in the library? If a child is not safe while studying in a library of their school or college, they can be safe nowhere. We all send out children, and at my age, grandchildren to get education. Even my grandson is doing engineering from Jamia. But the police did not spare the children there. If the prime minister stays quiet while his police enters classrooms and libraries, we have to protest. What have we to lose anyway?’

Is that why she came out to protest?

‘This was one of the reasons. There was the fear of the CAA too. Also, NRC and NPR. We have grown up in India. And suddenly, we are asked to give proof that we are Indians. My parents were from Deoband. I lived there before marriage. Then came to Delhi after marriage, but my husband died some fifty years ago. I have been a widow for fifty years now; how do I prove my husband was an Indian? I know he was an Indian, but how do I prove it on paper? He is long dead. Does the government have no sensitivity? Then they spread a rumour that the women sitting in protest at Shaheen Bagh take ₹500 a day to sit there. It is all dirty talk. Can they talk like that about their mothers? My son is into refrigeration and air conditioners. I can pay the leaders who made these allegations ₹5000. Let them ask their mothers, wives or daughters to come and sit here in the freezing cold. We did not move from here when icy winds were blowing, when we were told that the temperature had fallen to 2 degrees Celsius. We will not move till the black law is repealed.’

Does she know enough about the law she wants repealed?

‘All I know is, we are all Indians. You see there, what is written over there’, she says, pointing to a little placard stuck to a wooden pole. It reads, ‘Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai, apas mein hain bhai-bhai’ (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians are brothers).

‘Our government needs to read that. They are discriminating against Muslims through CAA. We have grown up with the notion that we should help the needy. Tell me, when you give ₹10 or 20 to a beggar, do you first ask his religion? You do not. But our government first wants to know the religion of a person seeking shelter here before helping him. Is that fair? And now, we are told to give documents to prove we are Indians. If we aren’t Indians, why did you make our Adhaar cards? My son has a driving licence too; also a passport. Are these not Indian documents? Or did we invent them ourselves. So, I sit here in protest every day. But I’m not alone. We are all together. My daughter-in-law comes in the morning after her children go to school. My daughter is sitting there on the rug,’ she says, pointing to a woman in a yellow scarf and cream colour salwar-kameez. She is called Naushaba. Naushaba nods at co-author Ziya Us Salam and soon shifts her focus to the ongoing speech from the stage.

Sarwari, meanwhile, exhibits her sensitive side. ‘We are told to shift from here. We are not going to shift. You can use lathis (sticks) or bullets, we will take them, but not move from here. We are here to save the Constitution, the law of the land. India belongs to us too. When the media says Shaheen Bagh women have blocked the traffic from South Delhi and Noida, it does not tell the complete truth. We do not hold up any school bus. We make sure that children are not troubled. We do not hold up any ambulance. We do not want anybody to die because we are protesting for our rights. You do not believe my word. You send an ambulance at any time yourself, then see, how I myself will ensure nobody disturbs it for a minute. But did the government think twice before using lathis on our children and sisters protesting at other places? You know what happened in JNU, in AMU? You should ask the government to answer this question. The media asks us to answer the questions, but it does not have the guts to ask the government why it does not talk to Shaheen Bagh’s old women who are sitting in a dharna for the past thirty-five days. Tell me, who leaves the comfort of the home and hearth to sit on the road in the biting cold of

Delhi? We came out because it is a do or die situation. If we keep quiet today, there is no tomorrow.'

Her anger with the government seems at a tipping point. So, I try to lighten her mood saying, 'You sit here all day and night. Where do you go to change clothes, to bathe, etc.?''

'Oh! That's not difficult. There's a mosque nearby. We use its toilet. Also, a hospital (actually a nursing home) has opened its toilet to protestors. Anybody can go there. We, senior women, take turns to go home. One of us goes home, she has a bath, changes her clothes and comes back. Then the next one goes. It works like that. We women organise everything. Every now and then there is a rumour of the police or army coming over to break the protest, to tear our shamianas, etc. Then, we call each other. The women who may have gone back home to attend to some work, come rushing back. My house is in one of the lanes here. I'm not afraid to go out at midnight also. It is my land. Why should I be afraid? Modi should be afraid. When women decide to do something, they don't stop without accomplishing it. Aur ab humne thaana li hai, ye qanoon wapas lena hoga sarkar ko (And now we are determined that the government will have to roll back this law). The government thought Muslim women are weak and helpless. We know how to fight for our rights.'

Indeed.

Noorun Nisa, Eighty



Noorun Nisa was another senior citizen to protest regularly.

Her toothless smile, her luminous eyes give the look of a timeless woman. She could be the proverbial old woman in a Hindi film of yore. She could be seventy. She could be eighty. Or even more. ‘Hamari umar se kya karna? Kaun uss waqt janam patri banvata tha? Zyadatar bachche ghar par paida hote the. Bas jo logone bata diya, wohi umar keh dete the’ (What does one have to do with my age? At that time who got a birth certificate made. Most babies were born at home. Whatever age people said I was, I used to tell that age).

Welcome to the world of Noorun Nisa. She has been at the Shaheen Bagh protest since 15 December 2019, day one of the protest. The women, incidentally, came together with a handful of men after the police raided Jamia in search of students who had raised anti-CAA slogans. The menfolk went back to work the next day, the women stayed put. The numbers kept growing, with each new woman gaining confidence and inspiration from

the presence of others. Most inspiring have been the eighty-plus women in the sunset of life, but not ready to throw in the towel. Noorun Nisa, for instance.

She is in that delectable stage of life when, forget a year or two, even a decade or two added or deleted to her life does not matter to her. ‘Why bother? Maut ka farishta birth certificate dekh kar nahin aata. Jab jaane ka waqt hota hai toh koi nahin rok sakta (The angel of death does not come after seeing the birth certificate. When it is time to go, nobody can stop). But before I die, I want to see this CAA law repealed. We are all Indians, whatever our religion. Our government wants to divide us. We will stay united. See, I am a mother. Tell me which mother would like to see her children go to jail because they do not have documents? Nobody. And in our country, lakhs of people are poor. They have no home, no education. They cannot even write their name. I’m not the only woman of my age who didn’t go to school, most did not. I’m from Meerut. I did not see any girl in my time going to school. How is a poor person to prove he is Indian?’

Is she confident her long protest will bear fruit?

‘Who is to say kal kya hoga (what will happen tomorrow). But look here, media comes here every day to interview the women of Shaheen Bagh. Now the world knows Shaheen Bagh exists. It is because of us women. Three of us went to television. They made a video of us. It is because our sisters were seen on television by the world that everybody is coming here. If the world is coming here, sarkar ko bhi aana hi padega (government too will have to come).’

Noorun Nisa’s is quite an inspiring presence. Not much stronger than the frail Bilquis, she offers her daily prayers at the protest site only. When she prays, another protestor keeps other participants from coming in front of her. When her fellow citizens do it, she does the same. ‘That we all have to do. Else, how will one pray? We can’t go home five times a day. In fact, at night also, when some of the younger women go home, we sleep on the rugs spread on the floor. When it rains also, we do not move back. Come what may, we have to face it. Nothing is gained sitting at home. You too have come here to talk to me because I am at the protest. If I were sitting at home, you wouldn’t have known who is Noorun Nisa. Now the world knows.’

Incidentally, the day she speaks to the co-author sees the maximum rush of people at Shaheen Bagh. Every road, lane, bylane is taken. Forget vehicular traffic, it is not possible for people to stand in one place. There is invariably pushing and jostling. It was the Sunday when a rumour had spread that officials from the United Nations were coming to Shaheen Bagh to see for themselves the strength of the protest. So, people from far and wide had joined. There was a batch of Sikhs from Punjab. There were farmers from Haryana just as there was a contingent from Bihar. It seemed everybody wanted to be a part of history. And history Shaheen Bagh was making.

‘I am told some three lakh people have visited since morning. Nobody can count that many. So it is an estimate. But if lakhs of people are supporting us, can the government stay away? No. They will have to come to us. And we will talk. But first the prime minister and the home minister should speak in one voice. One says there is no talk of NRC, the other says it is part of CAA. They are interlinked.’ These are politically wise words from a woman who has never stepped out of her home for any cause. ‘I have seen the 1947 Partition, the creation of India and Pakistan. This is like second freedom struggle. Ab ladai ladni to padegi (Now we will have to fight the battle). Pehle angrez se ladne the, ab apno se ladna padh raha hai (Earlier we fought the British, now we have to fight our own). But CAA has to go. NPR has to go. NRC has to go. We are not moving an inch from here. A BJP leader (Home Minister Amit Shah) said, the government is not moving back an inch. So, we want to tell them, we are not moving back half an inch. I must be his mother’s age. I know better.’

The United Nations’ rumoured delegation to meet the grannies of Shaheen Bagh never came, nor was it ever likely to come, but it served to remind the protestors of the influence the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh had come to enjoy over collective conscience. Noorun Nisa is not a wee bit affected by the failure of a supposed delegation to come. ‘I don’t know who was supposed to meet us. We were told that a foreign delegation was coming. But how many foreigners and mediawale (media persons) can I entertain here? I’m tired of speaking to them,’ she says, clearly not able to fathom the difference between an official delegation and members of the media.

‘I am tired,’ she says. Must be, I add, sitting on a wooden cot all day long with their legs crossed, no arm rest, no back rest. ‘Yes, I do get tired. We all get tired. But then we tell each other, either sit here with thousands of other sisters with tea flowing all the time, samosas coming for all, and biryani for dinner. Or else, prepare to sit in that jail [detention centre] where there will be no comfort, no family member. Who would like to die like that? Aise mare bhi to amar kehlaenge (Even if we die here, we will be called martyrs).’

With that unwavering spirit, Noorun Nisa waves the tricolour, and assures a fellow protestor she is not going away. ‘I go only for toilet and doing ablution for prayer. Rest of the time, I am here.’

Bilquis, Eighty-two



Granny Bilquis became a mega hit. She was called to address protests in other cities too.

A young speaker from Patna wants to conclude his address at Shaheen Bagh on a Sunday afternoon with the national anthem. There are several hundred women sitting on rugs many have brought from home. Some have children on their lap. On either side of the pandal, men, young and old hang around, some curious, others keen to help just in case the women on protest need something. As the speaker makes the announcement from the stage, all men immediately stand to attention, leaving everything, including half-finished food on plate. All the women too get up from the rugs to stand for the national anthem. For most, it has been years since they stood for the national anthem in their school assembly. Many have never been to a school, or even inside a cinema hall where national anthem has begun to be played in recent years. Singing it at Shaheen Bagh is their first live experience of the national anthem.

While most women stand on the floor, half a dozen senior citizens protest from a makeshift takht, a hard bed with a rug spread across. They are the cynosure of all eyes. On hearing the call for national anthem, Sarwari immediately stands up—she is remarkably agile for her age. Not so fit is Bilquis. She is eighty-two. It takes her a few seconds to realise why women around her are standing in attention, then she musters up all her strength, raising herself by placing her hands first on the takht, then holding on to the hand of a woman standing next to her, before finally managing to stand up after supporting her right knee with her hand. By then, the national anthem is half over, but Bilquis stands in reverence for rest of the duration. Then, she uses the same route to sit down, her one hand supporting her knee, the other holding on to the hand of the woman on her left. By then, a new speaker has started his talk with a few fiery slogans, and Bilquis joins other women in following each call to Inquilaab with Zindabad. She repeats this routine at least half a dozen times every day, and recalls, ‘We sang Jana Gana Mana on 31 December at night. It was cold but we got energy from each other’s presence. People’s presence adds warmth.’ She adds, ‘I pray on the same takht every day. But I can no longer pray while standing, so I sit and pray.’ Years may have sapped her of physical energy, but she remains mentally strong and alert.

‘I have four sons and a daughter’, she says, showing four fingers together for her sons, then one separately to mean her daughter. ‘My sons are like this’, she again raises her hand, this time bringing the four fingers close together. ‘They live like brothers should. They are all married. They are all drivers. They have their wives and children. They all respect me. Nobody can play music at home when I’m around. Here, they play these songs [in protest] to keep people interested. But nobody at home tells me not to come here. They know I’m here for a good cause. One of my daughters-in-law tells me every day that if I fall sick, I should call her. Like me, she is from Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh. Besides our family relationship, we all have that bond of the same town. But I tell her, am I special? Have I landed from the skies? I have to be here with all these women,’ she says, pointing to the other women sitting in protest. She adds, ‘They have families too. Many have small children. Hamara kya? (What about us?) I have lived my life. Now, before I breathe my last, I want to make sure my children and their children stay Indians, nobody questions

their citizenship. We were born in India and we will die in India. Today is not the time to sit at home. Even if I die, I want my children's future to be secure. Nobody should ask them to prove their citizenship.'

But CAA does not question the citizenship of any Indian, I remind her.

'I have heard this. But how do I trust the government's word. We saw those disturbing images from Assam, people dying in jails [detention centres]. Modi said there is no talk of NRC, if there was no talk of NRC why did you bring the law? Aadmi kuch toh mashvara karta hai faisla karne se pehle (People do consult before arriving at a decision). Now, young or old, we all have decided to boycott NRC-NPR. When the sarkari babus (government officials) come to our homes, hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge. Hum bhi Hindustani hain. Humein kisi se patra ya certificate nahin chahiye (We are also Indians. We do not need any document or certificate from anybody).'

Bilquis might be slim, bent with age, but she continues undeterred. 'What is important is not that I am eighty-two, but that I am here to support other women. Modiji always talked of helping Muslim women. He used to tell the world that he saved Muslim women from instant triple talaq. Now the same Muslim women, his sisters, mothers are sitting here for more than a month. Why does he not talk to us? Or is he only interested in selling sob stories of Muslim women? We too have a voice. We know how to raise it. We will not bow down. We will not backtrack till the law is repealed. Women in our Muslim society don't step out unnecessarily. But when the need arises, we don't hold back. The Quran does not stop women from going out. If we stay at home, it is because we believe we are needed to groom our children, keep the house clean for everybody. Today, we have stepped out because the nation needs us. Humein apne samvidhan ko bachana hai (We have to protect our Constitution). You see so many photographs of Baba Ambedkar, Gandhiji, Maulana Azad. They made our laws. Today, the government wants to change our rules of living. Whether one is Hindu or Muslim, everybody will be impacted by these laws of the government. First, they will go for Muslims, it is true. That is why you see so many Muslim women here. Then, they will go for other minorities ... they think minorities have no voice, no godfather. We want to tell the government, we will die but not submit. What do I have to lose? I have

lived my life. It is my sons and their children who have to live. So, we all have to protest, shout, scream so that the deaf hear.'

Does she really expect the prime minister to come to Shaheen Bagh?

'Why not? At the time of elections, all politicians go to every nook and corner, every village, every town. Why not now? Raja ko bhi awaam ke paas jaana padta hai. Ye naya daur hai (Even the king has to go to the public. This is the new age). I'm also here for that reason. Otherwise, can you ever imagine an eighty-two-year-old woman sitting in a dharna for days on end in the freezing cold of Delhi? These are tough times.'

Asma Khatoon, Ninety

For two months, in the biting cold of Delhi, Asma Khatoon sits hunched on a carpet, a blue shawl covering her head, her face barely visible. Her fingers are all wrinkled and stiff; her face is lined with innumerable creases. There is a curious glow in her eyes though. But, it is rarely visible as she keeps her eyes down most of the time. For anybody who has not seen her outside, it is her image that remains long after leaving Shaheen Bagh. She sits near the makeshift stage, trying to keep the din away from her ears by wrapping a shawl tightly around her head and ears. Whether she is happy or disturbed at the turn of events is not communicated by her placid face. No emotion registers immediately on her face.

She could be any grandmother from a middle- or lower-middle-class Muslim family in the Gangetic plains, the kind who would get up for her prayers at the appointed time, eat a little, chew paan, and go back to her bed only to get up at the time of the next prayer. Earlier, she had not even been to the local grocery shop. 'But circumstances have dragged us out of our houses. It was important for us to step out to protect the Constitution. I'm not an educated woman. My grandmother didn't allow me to pursue education. She kept me in a house with a gilded roof. So, I am jaahil (ignorant). But I have married off ten children. Life has taught me. I understand the danger to the Constitution.'

Ask her about the CAA, and she musters up all her strength to reply aggressively, even ferociously. ‘It is a black law. It has to be taken back. The prime minister is my son’s age. I’m like his mother. He should not trouble me. I’ve been told he goes to seek his mother’s blessings on festivals. I do not read but there are photos everywhere of him touching his mother’s feet. Achcha hai (It is good). But should he treat others’ mothers differently? I’m a mother, so I will not curse him, but he has troubled us all. He should think about it, about what he has done that the grandmothers who should be resting at home are on the streets fighting for their children, grandchildren. Why did he make a law that people are forced to oppose? He might be a rich man. He might be the government itself. I’m a poor woman. But so what? I might die but I will fight with all my might for my children, their children. The government says it will not backtrack, but we will not backtrack either. The government might have the power, we are ready to die. A man cannot run away from death. We are ready to face bullets, but we will not move an inch from here. I condemn those who alleged that we get ₹500 a day and biryani to sit in protest. I tell them, lies do not last, truth does. My son and granddaughters bring me food. I do not like biryani. But let me remind you, Modi himself went to Pakistan to eat biryani with Nawaz Sharif.’

A little more than two weeks into protest, Asma went to NDTV India studios where she threw an open challenge to the opponents: ‘I can reel out the names of nine generations of my family members. Can the prime minister give the names of even seven generations of his family?’ she asked, before going ahead to actually reel out the names of all the scions of her family, leaving both the anchor and co-panellists speechless. Later, she had no clue where she had been! ‘I don’t know where I went. I have never been there all my life. But I know I went to a place where they made a video of me. There were people with camera and lights making a movie. I was seen on television talking against new laws. That is how the word travelled across the world. Aap bhi toh tabhi aaye hain (You too have come due to that). Initially, people were saying what would I do on television. Now, they have the answer. Achcha raha (It was good).’

Khatoon’s age is a bit of a blur. Sometimes, she says she was fifteen at the time of Independence. At others, she says she was seventeen. That makes her age between eighty-eight and ninety, not a lot of difference, one

would say. ‘But critical in the age of NPR,’ she says, adding with a determination, ‘Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge. Who has paidaish ka saboot (proof of birth) in my generation? Then, I have come to know here that so many people were excluded from the NRC because their names were misspelled. What kind of government throws you in jail because somebody who does not know you wrote the wrong spelling of your name? Try as the government might, we are not moving from here. We are here for our right. We are here to tell the government that we are all Indians. We do not need to give any certificate to anybody. If I am not an Indian, how come I have lived here for ninety years? Which government grants visa for ninety years? This is my country. I’m not going away.’

She seems determined, so much so that she claims, ‘I have seen the British raj. I have seen the Emergency.’ Then in the same breath, she adds, ‘Now I’ve seen 2019. The British could not break our spirit. This law also will not be able to break us. I might die here but I will not go away. My children occasionally advise me to stay home in this cold weather. But I’m not going away. If I die I become a martyr for my children, for the children of our nation.’

Then, almost rhetorically, she turns to ask, ‘You know what? I pray five times a day on this ground. I touch it with my forehead in every prayer. After I die, I will be buried in this land. Now the government wants us to show evidence that we belong here? I’m not going away. And I want to ensure, nobody has to go away. Sirf is kale qanoon ko jana hai (Only this black law has to go).’

Incidentally, Dadi (grandmother) Asma Khatoon was actually not supposed to be in Shaheen Bagh at all when the police raided the Jamia library. She hails from Bihar and had come down to celebrate the birth of a granddaughter towards the end of 2019. That is when she heard of the alleged police atrocities on the students asking the government to repeal CAA. Unafraid, she jumped into the fray, taking everybody by surprise. For her family, she was a venerable grandmother. The outside world had not heard of her. Today, she leads the protest against the new laws and policies of the central government. She speaks with polish, balancing her old-world wisdom with sharp repartee. ‘Modi says he will bring people from abroad. And he will banish those Indians who do not have documents. It is injustice. We all live together, eat together. We eat from the same plate. They [non-

Muslims] are part of our feasts. We are part of their feasts. There is no difference. I'm fighting for all my brothers. Wherever women are protesting, they are all using their brains. It is not a mindless protest. We are all together. Modi should not think we are alone. We are all united.'

Shabbeeran, Eighty

The day the three grandmothers—Bilquis, Asma Khatoon and Sarwari—came in the public eye after a live television show, Shabbeeran did not go to a satellite channel office to talk of the Shaheen Bagh protest. It was a rare day she was missing from the site. Otherwise, every day, Shabbeeran would be there, raising her voice the loudest when she liked something, be it a point made by a speaker, or a couple shared from stage.

Having not had the benefit of formal education does not faze her. Not ready to talk of missing the limelight by going to a television show, she is forever keen to express her opinion, be it about the CAA or Prime Minister Narendra Modi whom she holds solely responsible for all the ills afflicting the nation, be it people catching cold at the protest site, students missing their classes or the business coming to a standstill. Name the problem, and she will give you the cause! Solution? Get rid of CAA!

At Shaheen Bagh, she insists on telling whosoever is willing to listen how she is certain of her pedigree, how she can give the names, year of birth and address of many generations of her family. Like Asma Khatoon, she challenges Modi to do likewise. 'Please tell us where did you play with marbles? Did you play gulli-danda (a game played with sticks) or gend-balla (cricket)? Where are your ancestors from? We were born here, we will die here. Nobody can throw us out. I'm from Meerut. My father was among the elite of the city. After marriage, I came to Delhi. My in-laws were from Turkman Gate, gali Teliyan. Can the prime minister give us such details of his early years?'

When she speaks in such a charged-up manner, her spectacles slide a little low towards her nose. Her shawl often slips from her head. Her bangles, obviously loose for her wrists, slide towards her forearms. They

often distract attention when she speaks, but then she makes up for it with the strength of her voice, her volubility. Brimming with confidence, she says, ‘People ask me, what am I doing here? The question should be asked not to me but to those who are still sitting at home, thinking CAA will not affect them. Which mother can see her children going to a detention centre or being hit with lathis by the police? Those who are still not coming out are the ones who have not seen brutality from close quarters. I have heard what the police did in Turkman Gate in Indira’s [Gandhi] time. I have seen what happened in Meerut just recently when people took out a rally against CAA. Is it not sufficient reason to protest?’

Shabbeeran claims she stood in long queues to ‘withdraw ₹2000 for veggies’ when Narendra Modi announced demonetization. ‘I went to Gokulpuri [North East Delhi] to withdraw ₹2000. I stood in a queue for hours, can you imagine? We did because the government had made currency notes invalid. We respected the decision. We put up with the problems. The prime minister gave us a slogan of “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao”. Then brought the daughters to the road! Children who should be studying in schools and colleges are sitting on the road and protesting, but he’s not affected. Why would he be? He claims he does not have a family. They ask us to move from the road, clear the place. Why? It is our home. We eat here, we sleep here. We are not going back until the CAA goes back.’

Naziya, Twenty-four

‘Shaheen Bagh protest took her son, not the will to fight’, was a headline in *The Times of India*. Even in times when one is often indifferent to tragedy unless it is personal, this one shook the reader.

On the coldest of days, four-month-old Mohammed Jahaan warmed Shaheen Bagh’s protesters with his toothless smile. They held him by turns and sometimes painted the tricolour on his cheeks to go with his woolen ‘I Love My India’ cap. But four days ago, he stopped coming to the protest. The cold proved too much for him and he’s gone to a better place. ‘He went in his sleep,’

said his mother, Naziya, who has not given up the fight. ‘I had returned from Shaheen Bagh around 1am. After putting him and my other children to bed, I went to sleep. In the morning, I found him motionless.’¹

Naziya and her husband Arif rushed the baby to the nearest hospital where he was declared dead on arrival. Jahaan was Naziya and Arif’s third baby. They have a five-year-old daughter and one-year-old son. Arif blamed the government for the loss of his child. ‘Had the government not brought in CAA and NPR, my wife would not have had to go for protests. My son would have been alive.’

The mother of Jahaan, however, proved she was made of sterner mettle. Three days after the loss of her child, she was back at the protest site. Once again raising slogans against the discriminatory laws. Once again asking for CAA to be repealed, and pledging ‘Hum kaagaz nahin dikhaenge’ if asked to show documents for the NPR. She had been coming regularly to the protest site since 18 December. She took only a three-day break due to the loss of her baby. ‘I fight here for the future of my children, for the future of everybody’s children. I live in a jhuggie (slum). I do not have a roof over my head. How am I supposed to show proof of my residence? If I don’t speak up today, my children will be declared stateless. Where will they go?’

Naziya lives close to the protest site in Shaheen Bagh. She has a hutment made of plastic sheets and pieces of cloth. Her husband drives an e-rickshaw. Earlier, he used to do some embroidery work. However, as the economy took a downturn, the earning from embroidery proved insufficient to meet the young family’s requirements. Initially, Naziya tried to help her husband by doing some embroidery work herself. When that too proved inadequate, her husband took to driving e-rickshaw, and did some embroidery work in spare time. Since the time Naziya decided to sit in protest, he had been dropping her every morning and picking her up after midnight. Every day, Naziya took along her children. It was a decision not often supported by her husband. But Naziya saw the larger picture and decided that if today she did not protest, tomorrow there may be no future for her children.

Jahaan, incidentally, had become quite a darling of the protestors. Women would take turns to take him in their lap. Boys brought a tricolour bandana for him and girls would often paint the tricolour on his cheeks. He

soaked in all the attention. Then one day, he caught a cold, or so his mother thought. It was to prove fatal.

Back at the protest site, Naziya claimed she was not afraid of death anymore. ‘I have already lost my son. What worse can happen to me. But I want to fight this law so that our children have a future tomorrow. I know I lost my child in this fight. I don’t mind if I lose my two other kids either, but the fight must go on. Sitting at home when this law is in force is not an option.’

Even as women at Shaheen Bagh extended her a helping hand, a shoulder to lean on, the boys put Jahaan’s picture on social media. The picture was promptly withdrawn. It was the last photograph of her deceased son for Naziya. She may be only twenty-four, but she gave ample evidence to all fellow protestors that she was made of rare mettle. With her peaceful protest, she proved she was as determined in this satyagraha as any of the grandmothers who attracted much more media attention. Age, she proved, is just a number. Finally, when told that the Supreme Court had taken suo moto notice of her child’s death at the protest, she said, ‘What alternative do I have? Either die in a detention centre or sit here in the cold with my baby? I cannot afford a maid. I’m a poor woman. My husband earns barely enough to run the family.’

Prakash Devi, Forty-eight



Prakash Devi was a regular participant.

Hers is the most poignant of stories emanating from Shaheen Bagh. Hailing from Karol Bagh, located around fifteen kilometres from the protest venue, Prakash Devi, full of good cheer and abundant optimism, came to join the protestors every day. She was in many ways an unusual protestor. She was neither a local resident of Shaheen Bagh nor a woman whose son or daughter studied at Jamia Millia Islamia. Yet, every morning she came after attending to household chores, every evening she went back after spending some seven–eight hours with women whose names also she did not know. The fact that most protestors in the initial days were Muslim women did not dissuade her. Nor did the attempt by Gunja Kapoor, a burqa-clad woman nabbed by the protestors, to defame the protest. Devi continued regardless. She knew the cause was greater than any individual gone awry. Soon, she graduated from being a protestor to a speaker. Not just at Shaheen Bagh, soon she was in demand at places like Khureji and Inderlok.

The protest helped Devi, well into her forties, change her viewpoint about the largest minority. ‘I joined the protest from early January. The Shaheen Bagh brothers have changed me. Their humility is to be seen to be

believed. I have always felt like a sister with them. There is a gentleman whom I now call Farid bhai who takes care of ladies who help with the running of the stage. For anything he is available. After coming here, my views about Muslims changed completely. All of us tend to live in rigid compartments. We have preconceived notions about people of other religions. We need to step out, mingle with each other. Now I tell my husband in Bhopal that Muslims are so caring that at night they protect us like our army does. The love I got from them I've never got anywhere else. Our political leaders have spread a lot of poison. The Shaheen Bagh protest is about real India, an India where every woman feels safe and respected.'

Devi teaches slum children; she reveals her mother is her inspiration, the one who taught her to break boundaries and serve humanity. 'After the Shaheen Bagh experience, I will not trust a word of any politician. They divide us. Shaheen Bagh unites.'

At the protest, she quotes the example of Upasna Sharma, the lady who grilled Gunja Kapoor, and reiterates, 'We are all sisters, whatever our religion.'

'We are all women whatever our religion. And in our society women have the weakest documentation. We have to fight for our identity,' she concludes.

Notes

1. *The Times of India*. 2020. 'Shaheen Bagh Protest Took her Son, not the Will to Fight'. *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 4 February.

The Men behind the Women

Behind the spontaneous, organic protest of Shaheen Bagh where anonymous women came into limelight, there was the silent but stout support of young men—men who had studied at some of the most prestigious universities and educational institutions, and experienced the crests and troughs of life. They always stayed backstage, but made sure everything flowed smoothly, be it interaction with the local police, keeping the local politicians at bay, or looking after the infrastructural requirements of a protest of such magnitude. They made sure that the women were short neither of speakers nor food and water. Not even inspiration. A group of some two dozen men put their mental and physical energies together, dipped deep into their pockets, burned the midnight oil, took leave from their jobs and businesses, and made sure that the tireless protestors were not affected one bit. In the early stages, these volunteers told the women the value of a peaceful protest, and what they stood to lose if they kept quiet at this juncture. The women were already fuming at the turn of events in Jamia, and soaked in every word shared by the young male protestors who had the experience of leading a protest in JNU or Jamia Millia Islamia. As the youngsters stood on the main road, the Birla Marg coming from Sarita Vihar to Jasola and Shaheen Bagh, the local women joined them, aware that they could not leave this battle to men alone. They had to stand up and be counted.

As recalled by Aasif Mujtaba, an IITian, and Aftab Ahmad, both early brains behind the protest, ‘On the evening of 15 December, there was a lot of commotion and heartburn. People wanted to express their resentment against the CAA. Then came the news of the violence in Jamia. People’s patience snapped at that moment. Many of the Shaheen Bagh residents have a connection with Jamia, either their children or they know somebody whose children study there. They were horrified as videos of violence trickled in. At that time, people came out to protest in Shaheen Bagh. Initially, there were mostly men. The women joined a little later. People

closed one side of the road, leaving the other side open to traffic. They barricaded the site. The angry masses raised slogans against the CAA. At that time, some miscreant threw a couple of stones from the other side. A truck passing by almost ran over the protestors. That is when we decided to close both sides of the road.'

Their recollection of the events in the early hours is at odds with what has been published in a section of the media.

Writing in *The Asian Age*, Suparna Sharma said:

'All we can do is disrupt', said Sharjeel (Imam). 'That is the only way to be heard. Sitting at Jantar Mantar, even for years, will yield nothing. We were talking of blocking both sides of the highway, of disrupting the water and milk supply to Delhi,' he told me over conversations that began on January 16 ... I said, 'Hamein baithna hai, hum baithenge. Jisko jana hai woh jayein,' Sharjeel recalled to me. 'Women had come and gone. At around 8.30 pm, police came and asked us to vacate at least one side of the road. I agreed, though I was not very happy.'¹

As soon as the barricades were removed from one side of the road, a protestor, carrying the tricolour, started throwing stones at the passing vehicles.

'It was like a scene from Mumbai locals as people rushed back to the street and many started pelting stones,' Sharjeel recalled to me. He had a mike in his hand and kept shouting, 'Stop the violence, don't vandalise property.'

Aasif Mujtaba said, 'You can't win over a state by throwing stones.'

Police fired rubber bullets and Sharjeel left after 10 pm for Aasif's home in Shaheen Bagh. During the night, 10–15 young men blocked both sides of the road again. 'I returned, at around 7 am the next day, and a crowd was sitting. I spoke for an hour about why we must not to pick up stones,' Sharjeel told me ... By December 16, ... a mike had materialised and a makeshift stage was organised by some local Congress leaders on Road No. 13A ... [the focus was] on creating a safe space for people to sit in peaceful protest and use the stage for students, scholars and experts to talk about CAA, NRC, citizen's rights, the Constitution and the law.

Sharjeel Imam and Aasif Mujtaba had only met for the first time on December 14, during anti-CAA protests at Jamia. Sharjeel, a BTech and MTech in computer science from IIT Mumbai, is now a student of history pursuing his

PhD in JNU. Aasif, a resident of Shaheen Bagh, who did his BTech and MTech in environmental engineering from IIT Delhi, is pursuing his PhD from IIT.²

Next morning, when Aasif, Aftab and others reached the spot, only a handful of protestors remained. Mostly there were students of Jamia and JNU who were high on passion, but low on experience of running a protest. There was a solitary woman protestor Aarti holding aloft the tricolour.

Shouting slogans is one thing, arranging the basics of a protest quite another. It was at that time that Aftab came forward. He, with the help of few locals, arranged for a stage, a microphone, a small sound system and even got a few banners and posters printed locally in hardly any time. It is the same tricolour-holding Aarti whose idea to make the protest women centric worked and gave the protest a distinct personality of its own. A team of smart individuals comprising locals and students chalked a plan to help the women protestors. Thus came about photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Maulana Azad, Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah. Later, portraits of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, Ramprasad Bismil and Dr. Zakir Husain were added. Importantly, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel were kept out of the stage; the idea being to give credit to the founding father often ignored by successive Congress and the BJP governments.

As far as the protestors were concerned, the strategy was simple. By the afternoon of 16 December, hundreds of local women had trooped out to sit in protest. The volunteers adopted the simple strategy of SAP—Sensitivise, Activise, Pressurise. At that stage, the women needed a bit of hand-holding, some tutoring. They had all come out spontaneously to counter the brutality unleashed on the students. They had all been angered by the announcement of CAA, but did not know how to counter the Act. It was then that a new full form was given to CAA. It was now called Communal, Arbitrary Act. That set the ball rolling.

It was not a smooth sailing though. The women were opposed by the local shopkeepers, particularly the big showroom owners, who claimed they were losing business worth lakhs due to the incessant protest at their doorstep. They alleged that they had taken huge loans from banks for their businesses and had to pay the salaries of their staff even if the showrooms were closed.

Several showrooms on Road No. 13A remained shut. ‘The shopkeepers were criticising us every day, saying “60-70 lakh ka stock credit pe liya hua hai, staff bhi garib hai. Your blockade has shut our businesses but we have to pay staff salaries, we have to pay rent,”’ Aasif recalled.

‘The police were also saying, ab tum hato, khali karo, bahut ho gaya. Almost every day, till the 1st of January.’

Sharjeel, Aasif and other volunteers had regular meetings with the police, often at night, near the police barricade, at a distance of about 100 metres from the protest tent. The plan was to keep the protest going for some days, then call off the blockade and carry forward the movement in some other form.³

Even as they faced pressure to call off the protest, the men hung in there, and took the necessary precautions to safeguard the lives of the protestors. Mindful of the protest being criticised in case of violence, including even the violence engineered by an outsider, the men got CCTV cameras installed at the place. And just in case things got too complicated legally, there were a couple of lawyers who resided in the locality. They stepped in to help the women on a complimentary basis. For instance, Advocate Firoz Iqbal Khan. He helped the women when a goon fired bullets in the air. ‘When Kapil Baisla alias Gujjar shot from behind the barricades (on 30 January 2020), a complaint was filed. People maintained the peace. I made sure that a complaint was lodged. On the same lines, when the women announced they were going to meet Home Minister Amit Shah on 15 February 2020, we decided to move an application with the police. A team of local lawyers was constituted. It was decided that a few lawyers will accompany the three grandmothers to understand the status of their application. They discovered that the application had to be moved not just to the local thana (police station) but also the destination police station. When the delegation moved the administration, they graciously replied that the application had been moved and due process was being followed. Then the grannies, being law-abiding and peaceful, decided to move back,’ shared Firoz Iqbal Khan.

Similarly, Firoz Iqbal Khan stepped in to help the protestors when Gunja Kapoor arrived at the protest site. She was a Hindu woman, as discovered later, but clad in a burqa. He recalled, ‘On the same day there was a delegation of Sikh brothers travelling from Punjab. They were detained before reaching Shaheen Bagh and sent off to a gurdwara in Maharani

Bagh. We negotiated with the administration that they should be allowed to join the protest. At the same time, a Hindu girl was discovered in a burqa. By the time I reached there, the girl was sitting in a medical camp near the stage. She was protected by women. The police came soon. A policeman tried to pull the girl by the hand. He was stopped not just by me but every woman present there. They said he had no such right. I said it is a procedural flaw. A woman constable was called. I was called by the police. I suggested that she be exposed to the media. Kapoor though did not reply to anything, but she was within her rights to do so. She was questioned by women protestors, but given a safe passage. We made sure no untoward incident happened because allegedly she tried to shoot with a hidden camera.'

All this happened behind the scenes. For the part-time protestor who came in after a day at work, these young men were neither accessible nor recognisable. But they were the ones who used their brains and resources to lend the protest a unique touch, a protest that became a movement with its mix of library, poetry, art gallery, a replica of India Gate and a detention centre. They were the usual professionals, a couple of IITians, some lawyers, others well placed in multi-national corporations, still others into their own business. Every day, they spent non-office hours in Shaheen Bagh, and except for the first couple of days when they had to double up as speakers and anchors on stage, they stayed behind the scenes. They arranged for food and water, lavatory, ablution centre and prayer space. Even a langar was set up. Later, realising that the protest was going to be a long drawn out affair, and many mothers and grandmothers perforce brought little children, these intelligent men added provisions of a library, then an art gallery. Added to it were drawing competitions for children, an opportunity to recite rhymes from stage. They were helped by some women volunteers who took it upon themselves to provide complimentary tuitions to students in need. Incidentally, several women did the job of a compere for days on end without any remuneration or even acknowledgement in the media—young women like Humaira, who hosted the programmes till 2 January, Ritu Kaushik, Prachi, Shagufta, Shehla, Shaheen, among others. The guests they introduced were often invited by Khursheed and Shamsuddin who voluntarily took on the responsibility of guest management.

While two men have been given credit by the media, notably Sharjeel Imam and Aasif Mujtaba, others have not got their moment under the sun, at least partly because of their self-effacing nature. Among them were Aftab and Aarti, who, at times, worked round the clock to make sure that not only the protest went on smoothly but also the protestors overcame all challenges to their existence. Whenever a word spread that the protestors could be removed by the police, within minutes hundreds of women joined in the protest. When a word was shared, even if never proven, that a delegation of United Nations' officials was visiting the site, these were the men who not only ensured that every centimetre of space in and around Shaheen Bagh was taken, but also that the organic protest left a favourable impression on any first-time visitor. Thus came about the human chains formed by men on two sides of the road near the protest site. The chains enabled the women to attend the protest and to go back without any unwanted male gaze. Aasif, meanwhile, looked after the stage, made sure that nothing anti-national was ever said and that no comments were made which could hurt the sentiments of any community.

Speaking to co-author Uzma Ausaf in the middle of a hectic day, co-organiser Syed Taseer Ahmed, one among the relentless volunteers, revealed that 'the protest is entirely voluntary. Whosoever claims that it is being managed by political parties or volunteers related to local politicians does not know the reality. In this protest, people have helped out according to their capacity, their skills, but all entirely voluntary. There is no Shaheen Bagh coordination committee. My job has been to cover any lacunae, anything missing. For instance, when the protest started on 15 December 2019, I announced from the stage that we needed contribution from people. A polythene bag was passed around and within minutes we had some ₹15,000–20,000. However, we immediately realised that collecting funds could endanger our integrity and we announced that whosoever wished to help was welcome to donate rugs, blankets, food, water, etc. We even put up a banner saying "No cash, no Paytm, etc."'

That did not deter some from alleging that the women were sitting on a daily fee of ₹500 and a plate of biryani. The women not only countered the allegations vehemently, they even invited the people casting aspersions on their integrity to send their wives, daughters and sisters to cross-check their

claims themselves. Then again, helped by noted advocate Mahmood Pracha, they sent a formal complaint to BJP leader Amit Malviya.

Then the three famous grandmothers, Asma Khatoon, Bilquis and Sarwari, even went to NDTV studios to air their version of the anti-CAA protests, and stayed firm in blocking both sides of the road in media interaction. Behind all these activities were men like Aftab, Taseer, Abid Sheikh, Sultan and Aasif. Taseer further told us, ‘On 25 December, the police came and nothing was left. There was a kind of a crisis. That day, I gave the sum initially collected to provide for water for the protestors and some food. A langar came up a little later. But the way people came forward to help would not have been possible for any one person to do. It was a divine help. The protest came to symbolise the resistance against various unpopular moves of the government, like demonetization, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), triple talaq, etc. With the Sikh brothers stepping forward to provide food every day, and notable personalities coming down to address the women, our role was confined to backstage. When we met the lieutenant governor, he requested that the road be opened for school buses. We appreciated his concern. Not only school buses, we allowed ambulances and vegetable and milk vendors to use the road. If we had not allowed these essential services, wouldn’t the locals have complained about no milk, no vegetables due to the protest?’

Then there was Munawar Alam, another key man behind the protest. He guided, advised and admonished the protestors. It was courtesy his regular interaction with the young protestors that the protest reached other parts of Delhi, notably Khureji, Jama Masjid and Seelampur. Speaking to News Nexxt, he said, ‘Basically it was a public protest. Jamia students were at front, the locals joined them. But as Shaheen Bagh became a symbol, people came from across the country. It was no longer a community protest, a Muslim protest, but a protest of all the underprivileged sections. It was a stir that soon took shades of a movement. It was no longer about the CAA. It was about righting several wrongs. It was a unity of the oppressed.’

Notes

1. Sharma, S. 2020. ‘Shaheen Bagh: How a Peaceful Protest Became a “Mudda” for BJP’. *The Asian Age*, New Delhi, 4 February. Available at:

<https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/040220/shaheen-bagh-how-a-peaceful-protest-became-a-mudda-for-bjp.html> (accessed on 20 April 2020).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

A Million Shaheen Baghs across the Capital

Within a month of starting the stir, the fame of Shaheen Bagh women spread far and wide. The leaders of the ruling party conceded in personal conversation that they had not expected much opposition to the amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955. They were prepared for some resistance in Assam and pockets of North East India, not much elsewhere. When the Shaheen Bagh women sat on an indefinite strike against the Act, it caught the government napping. The surprise element of the protest, the unexpectedness of the struggle being led by Muslim women not only caught the authorities off guard, it also ensured much greater media footage. The media too was used to marches and dharnas by university students, not the low-profile, almost anonymous housewives and local school teachers. Newspaper correspondents who had never stepped in the area beyond an occasional trip to Jamia took local help to reach the place of protest. Then, as the women proved more resilient than anybody had bargained for, even the editors were forced to get off their lofty pedestal and come down to meet Shaheen Bagh women now charting out history. They sat with them, chatted with them. The visuals they relayed inspired millions.

The women spoke fearlessly to the most high profile of visitors, whether they were from the world of music, theatre, academics or politics. They were as confident from the stage. No stage fright, nothing about being overawed by the occasion. Some of them even met the lieutenant governor of Delhi. Again, no nervousness, no anxiety, just a determination to continue with the stir that had by then assumed gigantic proportions. A small-time Hindi daily even ventured to give a headline, 'Jisne Shaheen Bagh nahin dekhiya wo janmiya hi nahin' (He who has not seen Shaheen Bagh has not been born). What's more, the protest that had started with senior citizens in the limelight got the much-needed young blood when working women and college-going girls joined them within a couple of weeks of the protest starting in mid-December. It is at this point that the women decided they needed to take the message far and wide. Yes, every

evening Shaheen Bagh attracted more protestors and visitors than it could comfortably host, and they all carried a positive impression of the protest to their respective homes and colonies. Yet, for those still unable to come, or not convinced yet, there needed to be more Shaheen Baghs. The message needed to be percolated, maybe even taken to the doorsteps of people. For such people, women of Delhi started setting up a Shaheen Bagh in practically every nook and corner. Their idea being, if you cannot go to Shaheen Bagh, we will bring it to you. Of course, it helped them too. The women who were traveling some fifteen–twenty kilometres every day to sit in protest now could walk down a few metres and protest virtually next-door.

By the end of January 2020, Delhi had twenty-two protest sites; some like Mandawali, Zakir Nagar Dhalan, Lal Bagh, Shahi Eidgah, Sri Ram Colony and Brijpuri Puliya had never been heard of. Yet, they too raised their voice. They too sat in protest, braving the cold, risking life and limb. This vast expanse was caused only partly by the need to have a convenient protest site, but largely by the education most of these young women had gained over the years. They were not the self-effacing women of yesteryears who would be silenced by the slightest male opposition. Having seen the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh staying firm in the face of challenge, these young women mustered up courage to replicate Shaheen Bagh in their colonies. Within no time, they all succeeded, though all had to come through a baptism by fire. Almost everywhere, the police tried to either remove the women completely from the protest site, or shift them to a park or a piece of land not often in use. Every time, women proved difficult to dislodge. The birth of this active, socially conscious citizenry proved that public school background or origin from an affluent family was not needed to contribute to the society. An emancipatory action could stem from what is otherwise considered a conservative segment of the society. At another level, these unsung heroines of the struggle also spoke highly of the feminisation of education among the Muslims. As social anthropologist Mohammed Talib told the co-author Ziya Us Salam, ‘This education is both modern and traditional. The products of both systems have found their unique ways to integrate with the wider mainstream of society. It has definitely produced agency among women, young and old. One hallmark of

agency in this respect is self-confidence in defense of oneself and single-mindedness to change the conditions one finds oneself in.’

This single-minded aim of ending the discriminatory laws brought the women first to protest, then protests to their doorsteps. Living up to its name, Shaheen Bagh (Garden of Falcons) had really taken wings.

Nizamuddin

Heavy rains accompanied by a hailstorm lashed Delhi one morning in January 2020. As many as fourteen trains to the city arrived late due to the weather conditions. The previous night there had been intermittent rainfall with many parts in South Delhi reporting heavy rain in the wee hours. It was on this night that Delhi Police decided to remove the women protesting against the CAA from Nizamuddin. The women, clearly inspired by their counterparts at Shaheen Bagh, had been sitting in a dharna since the Republic Day. On the first day, there were less than a hundred women at the protest site. As the word spread, women swooned in from Nizamuddin, Bhogal, Ashram and even Okhla, some seven–eight kilometres away. Soon there were a thousand women raising their voices at Nizamuddin, having parked themselves on a road leading to Bara Pullah, and not far from the historic Nizamuddin dargah. Just as the dargah attracts people of various faiths, so did the protest.

There were plenty of girls from Jamia Millia Islamia, a few from JNU and University of Delhi. Most though were housewives from the vicinity. Taking a leaf out of the Shaheen Bagh protest, senior citizens too decided to brave it out in the cold. They were all prepared for a chilly night with rains and strong surface winds. Except that Delhi Police had other ideas. The policemen and a few policewomen moved in swiftly, removing the rugs and blankets from the protest site, virtually shoving the protestors away. The women, however, refused to be cowed down, and fought back vehemently, though peacefully, for their blankets and rugs. They dared to look the police personnel in the eye and ask the provisions of the law under which they were deprived of their blankets. As the police personnel, first through

persuasion, then mild force, tried to remove the agitators, the protestors raised slogans against the police, then against CAA, reminding the men on duty that if the NRC is implemented, they too will have to stand in queues for submitting their documents, they too will be as vulnerable as the rest of the society. Not much worked, the police shoved the women to the park nearby, allowing them to protest from there. The protestors, however, were left poorer by blankets and rugs.

Undeterred by the absence of rugs and blankets, and unfazed by rain and cold winds, the women braved it out in the open, raising slogans against CAA till late into the night. A few hours later, they set up their tent all over again as they braced for a long fight against the new laws and policies of the government. Morning brought them the much-needed tea and biscuits.

It was to be the precursor of things to come as women continued to fight bravely for the idea of India against relentless machinery of the State. They had with them posters of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the rallying points. They served as an apt comment on what they were striving for, and how to go about it. The women strove for the Constitution of India which grants equality to all, irrespective of religion, region, caste or gender. They used Mahatma's tactics of peaceful satyagraha. And continued with their protest day in, day out.

With the little success of Nizamuddin, Delhi had notched up a new Shaheen Bagh.

Khureji



Khureji was one of the early local protests to be inspired by Shaheen Bagh.

As one enters the modest protest site at Khureji, barely a kilometre from Nirman Vihar metro station, a banner catches the eye immediately. It reads, ‘We the people of India’. In one sentence, it says all that had to be said about the inclusive nature of the protest. Above the one-line message are photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah. The anti-CAA protests have brought back Bhagat Singh to popular discourse. And reminded the new generations about the sacrifice of Ashfaqullah, a revolutionary who put his own life at stake in fighting the British. The use of the photographs of Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah is pregnant with meaning, while those of the Mahatma, being the father of the nation, are almost inevitable in any protest—more so, when the protestors claim to be following his tactics of satyagraha. On the same lines can be explained the presence of Dr. Ambedkar’s pictures as the agitators claim to be fighting for the protection of the Constitution of India. What is unforeseen and heart-warming is the respect shown to Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah, both of whom fought the British till their last breath. They were revolutionaries who were hanged by the British in the prime of life, Bhagat Singh being twenty-three and Ashfaqullah twenty-seven. The

symbolism is remarkable with the protestors silently staking claim to walk in their footprint, except this time, they are fighting not the colonial masters who were adept at divide and rule, but the Indian government's new laws that discriminate between one person and another on the basis of religion.

The Khureji protest started exactly a month after Shaheen Bagh, but gained a momentum uniquely its own. Conceived as an awareness campaign to tell the local people not to submit documents when the NPR is rolled out as it is the doorway to NRC, soon it became a movement by itself, with about a thousand women taking out a candle march, holding placards against CAA, NRC and NPR. They finally settled in a park on the main road connecting Nirman Vihar and Jheel and maintained a round-the-clock vigil. Like in Shaheen Bagh, here too, the women sat inside the tent on rugs borrowed from a local tent house, and young men stayed out, frisking the newcomers and keeping an eye for any suspicious element. The demonstrators wanted to maintain peace and did not want to be accused of instigating any violence. Hence, the precaution with the entry of everybody. However, here too, as the demonstrators claimed, the police swooped in one night around 2 am, switched off the street lights, removed the tents, leaving the women vulnerable on a cold winter night. There were drops of rain too. Some activists were rounded up by the police. For a couple of hours, only a handful of protestors remained. By the crack of dawn, it was business as usual as women regained their lost territory and continued to raise slogans against CAA, NRC and NPR. With the likes of human rights activists like Sadaf Jafar and noted legal eagle Prashant Bhushan visiting them, the women got the inspiration they needed. And the protest continued well into the next month. Fresh oxygen was supplied when Ladeeda Farzana and Ayesha Renna of Jamia, the girls who saved the life of a male companion from a lathi charge by the police, visited Khureji. With the brave daughters of India were two brave mothers, Radhika Vemula, mother of the Dalit scholar Rohith, and Saira Bano, mother of Junaid who was lynched aboard a train in 2017. When they spoke, the women of Khureji knew they had a roadmap in front of them, and some brave companions.

The protest also helped break many a social barrier. At the protest site were women taking out time every evening after their day-time jobs in offices to sit in solidarity with women sitting in protest for twenty-four hours a day. There were wealthy, middle-class and even some upper-

middle-class housewives who too had forsaken the comfort of their homes in the bone-chilling weather. Not to forget university students. Keeping them company were some domestic workers, the ubiquitous maids, many of whom would be working in the houses of some of the women seen at the protest site. These workers would go door to door to cook and clean in the morning. By afternoon, they would be at the protest site, sitting at the same place as their mem sahibs or madams. They would be served tea in the same disposable glasses, food on the same disposable plates. And raise slogans against a law that threatens to impact them all. This was a living embodiment of equality that Dr. Ambedkar so dearly wanted in our society. This was also a testimony of the mindset of the poor in uncertain times. Most had heard of horror stories from Assam where even a Kargil war veteran found his name missing from NRC. They were poor and hailed from families of landless workers. There was no way they could lay their hands on any land deeds of their forefathers simply because none probably owned any land at any time. Most of these workers, and indeed many of their children even today, were, or are, born at home. Hence, a birth certificate is an oddity, ruling out another evidence of being an Indian.

Under the circumstances, the Khureji protest, while demolishing many social barriers, acted as an apt vent for the poor to let out their frustration with the system that asked them to answer questions it had not prepared them for. The protest was called off after violence erupted in North East Delhi.

Jama Masjid

It started early, 20 December 2019 to be precise, when upcoming Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad ‘Ravan’ addressed the faithful after the Friday prayers from the doorstep of the historic Jama Masjid. As he read out the Preamble to the Constitution, at least 20,000 men and a few hundred women read after him. There was a scramble to touch him, shake hands with him, among the men. The women observed from a distance. For the next few hours, the residents of the walled city (a part of Old Delhi) could

not have enough of Chandrashekhar. The leader too reciprocated their warmth. A day after the address from Jama Masjid, he was arrested by Delhi Police. A few weeks later, when he got bail, the first place he came to was Jama Masjid, by now very much a crucial part of anti-CAA–NPR–NRC protests raging across the city. Almost a month had lapsed in between, but emotion still ran high against CAA.

The women who had been happy to repeat the Preamble after Chandrashekhar had meanwhile proceeded to occupy centrestage. On 8 January, more than a thousand women started a candle march after Maghrib (sunset) prayers. Holding a candle each, they marched from Lal Kuan to Chawri Bazaar and on to Jama Masjid. Along the way, they raised slogans against CAA and in favour of national unity near the age-old and now defunct Excelsior cinema, near Nai Sarak crossing, before settling down on the staircase of the mosque. In a disciplined manner, befitting a defence force, they sat on alternate stairs using the stair in between as a footrest. They carried placards against the new laws, challenged the government to break the unity of all Indians, and lit candles in a symbolic gesture of dispelling darkness. It was well past dusk by the time they concluded, but in many ways they had ushered in a new dawn. For too long the hijab-clad women had been confined to domestic responsibilities. For too long, they seemed to have lived a life of isolation, away from sisters of other faiths. With their anti-CAA protest, they broke many a barrier. Not only did they step out of their house to ‘protect the Constitution’, sing the national anthem every evening, they also built bonds with women of other religions who too joined the protest. Thus emboldened, the women virtually laid claim to sole use of the mosque staircase in the days to come. Every evening they gathered at the site, raised slogans against the new laws and the government. They used microphones too, many probably for the first time in life. They came prepared with facts, using newspaper clippings and online articles to drive home the point among the audiences that CAA–NPR–NRC were against the idea of India, against the ideals of the founding fathers. They were not only against one community, but against every poor person who is habitually weak on documentation. Of course, they also remind the audiences that women will be the worst hit. ‘Many are married off immediately after puberty or turning eighteen. Many go to new towns and cities. Many change their names after marriage without any official

record. How are they to reproduce their documents,' they remind fellow women. Every evening they lit fresh candles in a peaceful demonstration and went back home after clearing the residue wax from the stairs. They pledged to come back to the same place, same time the next day. The fight had to go on.

Meanwhile, after every protest by women, the men folk would come to the masjid to offer prayers. It was their way of fighting the CAA. Their prayers combined with women's patience and perseverance may just hold the key.

Turkman Gate

It was around the time of Emergency that Turkman Gate hit the headlines. Women and men gathered at the place. They faced bulldozers. They wanted to protect their houses from being razed, the men from having to undergo compulsory vasectomy. Then the women took the lead, making things extremely difficult for the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) officials charged with demolition. In their path-breaking book *For Reasons of State: Delhi Under Emergency*, John Dayal and Ajoy Bose wrote:

In the jeep sat DDA tehsildar Kashmir Lal. The tehsildar was a worried man. His orders were clear, but he knew in his heart they were not as easy as they sounded. 'Take it easy at first,' he had been told. 'Don't give any signs that might panic the people. Do it stage by stage.' Stage by stage, he thought. These people are so touchy that it would just need a small incident to create an explosion. This was not the first time he had led a demolition squad to Turkman Gate. He had come twice before, and both times the demolition squad had been beaten back. He still remembered the huge lathi in the hands of the burly dairy owner. Single-handedly he had beaten off a whole police posse ... The demolition caravan screeched to a halt before the Turkman Gate transit camp. Words had already spread that the demolition men were coming. The tehsildar's jeep was immediately surrounded by a crowd of residents, their eyes glowing with resentment and suspicion.¹

It turned out to be a fatal morning.

However, after those tumultuous days Turkman Gate slipped into slumber. Many residents had been forced to shift, and those who managed to stay back got busy picking up pieces of life all over again. Maybe no news was good news, but Turkman Gate almost never made news since then, as if trying to live up to the image of the saint after whom it has been named. Shams-ul Arifeen Shah Turkman Bayabani, a 13th-century saint who believed in living in bayaban (wilderness). A contemporary of Sultanate King Iltutmish, he had come to Delhi after the second battle of Tarain. At a time when a new township came up around Mehrauli, he preferred to roam the jungles before settling down in the wilderness around Daryaganj. When he died, he was laid to rest here; his being the oldest sufi shrine in the city. In the 17th century, Mughal King Shah Jahan named one of the fourteen gates of his empire after the saint. Today, there is little that is saintly about Turkman Gate. Life is as mundane or sacred as in any other part of Delhi.

But then things change, even after a prolonged lull. Like they did in the second week of January when women protesting against imposition of CAA decided to camp here in a peaceful, round-the-clock protest. Most had heard of Shaheen Bagh, some had been there too. They decided that they too would be a cog in the wheel of a possible social revolution. And they jumped right in. The men joined them. Soon, Turkman Gate was making news again; making all the right noise, its vantage location, its impressive history acting as an enviable backdrop. Against the Mughal era gate, the protestors found their voice. Soon, more and more denizens of Old Delhi joined them. Many came from Daryaganj, some from the residential colonies around Connaught Place. They all came with the beloved tricolour that they would wave at every opportunity. They raised slogans against the government, urging the authorities to take back the 'black law'. They attracted a big crowd on 15 January, marking the culmination of a month of protests at Shaheen Bagh. The women, in particular, came in impressive numbers. Clad in burqas, they waved the tricolour and vowed not to bow to suppression.

Next morning, Delhi Police swung into action. At a time when there were fewer protestors, the police raided the premises, arrested many of the demonstrators. The locals though were not about to give up. They recorded the detention showing the policemen forcing men to get into their vehicles,

or manhandling many peaceful agitators. They were taken to Rajendra Nagar and Srinivaspuri police stations. They were released late in the evening. Meanwhile, like in Emergency days, the shopkeepers, cutting across lines of religion and region, downed their shutters in solidarity. They formed a human chain around the place, making sure that the police action of 16 January would be the last.

The protest gained more popularity by the evening of 16 January with hundreds of more people coming over. They demonstrated agitatedly, but peacefully. They raised slogans and spoke vehemently, but made sure no violence took place.

Gradually, Turkman Gate ensured its place in the annals of anti-CAA protests, its residents rising in unison against the government in 2020, just as they had done in 1975. There is something about history. The more it changes, the more it remains the same.

Inderlok

For many years Inderlok hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons. In 2015, a scrap dealer was shot dead by two assailants on a scooty near the metro station. Earlier, in 2012, a headless body of a woman was found stuffed in a plastic bag near the station. She was in early twenties. Way back, in 2006, Inderlok had witnessed the brutal murder of seven members of a family, including four teenage girls and a seven-year-old boy. It seemed that murders were the only incident that brought media's attention to Inderlok—a working-class locality where many men still build trunks, the kind many women were given as part of their dowry in the years of yore. Others are into manufacture of spare parts of automobiles. Outside many shops, one can find goats tethered to a door handle or a grill, even an occasional sheep. In the distance is a mosque from where the muezzin calls for prayer five times a day. Some of the men answer the call, the women pray at home. It has always been that way here: men running shops, boys assisting them with errands, the women staying at home.

It changed in the winter of 2019–2020. As anti-CAA fever gripped the capital, many of the male residents went to the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi to participate in the protest. They raised slogans with Dalit leader Chandrashekhar and came back home to tell the tale to family members. The women too heard of Shaheen Bagh, and how some women in the autumn of life were leading the protest against the new laws. They watched with awe as several videos of the Shaheen Bagh grannies went viral. They too wanted to contribute to the cause. Shaheen Bagh, however, was too far from Inderlok. Next, the women did the best thing they could do: they built their own Shaheen Bagh near the metro station gate number 4. On the first day, 19 January 2020, only around two hundred women turned up to protest. But soon others joined them and the numbers started exceeding a thousand every evening. On weekends, the locals claimed, even two thousand people took part in the protest.

Like Shaheen Bagh, Inderlok has been a uniquely women's protest. Most women walk down to the place from their homes. Every morning they finish their domestic chores and come to the protest. Many call their children over in the afternoon once they are back from school. Early evenings are meant for preparing dinner at home followed by the best session of the day. It is then that the women come into their own. Raising slogans, chanting poetry, singing songs, they clap and applaud all the time. Never short of enthusiasm or energy, they hold on to their territory with zest. A rope is tied all along the place in a rectangular fashion. At the rear end, separating the place where women sit from the place where men stand and participate is some neat artwork. One shows NPR–NRC–CAA chronology as a gas cylinder waiting to explode. Another has the map of India with faces of people of four principal religions. Still another has a powerful fist with a message: 'Struggle on, we shall win'. This work encapsulates the spirit of Inderlok in 2020, a far cry from the day the area came into news due to assailants and murders. Today, Inderlok is a crucial part of anti-CAA chain where women take the lead in participation. And in a truly motherly way, they ask the guest speakers for a cup of tea, some biscuits, and maybe even offer biryani at the conclusion of a talk. In between, they take inspiration from the painted pictures of Jhansi ki Rani Laxmibai, Begum Hazrat Mahal and others. If Khureji reminds us of Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah, Inderlok tells us in no uncertain way that

women took part in the First War of Independence. And they are not stepping back from what is somewhat loosely dubbed as the second freedom struggle. Meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar continue to be the common glue between all protests. As does the tricolour.

Hauz Rani

The residents of South Delhi made their contribution to anti-CAA protest by organising protest marches at places like Hauz Khas, Defence Colony, Alaknanda and Vasant Vihar. However, almost all the protests were Sunday affairs where people gathered for a couple of hours, chanted slogans, exhorted each other not to give up in the face of odds, and dispersed. It helped spread the word but it was grossly insufficient for something like the CAA to be repealed. Around this time, mid-January onwards, round-the-clock protests had started in other parts of the city. So, the locals pooled in their resources and manpower to organise a similar indefinite protest at Hauz Rani, located opposite the post colonies of Saket and Press Enclave, and easily accessible from Malviya Nagar metro station.

Again, women took the initiative to occupy the space. Yet again, housewives brought up the numbers for a good part of the day. The evenings saw much greater participation with many professional women and some men joining in. The protestors were addressed by some upcoming poets, professors, even human rights activists. They all expressed the worst fears of the lovers of the Constitution: the CAA did not go against Article 14 alone, it was against Article 15 and even Article 21 of the Constitution. With a reasonably well-informed crowd, and well-educated women, the message about the nuances of the new law registered easily.

Also, one change came about in all the protest sites after it first began at Hauz Rani. Realising that many women brought schoolgoing children with them to the protest, and that the students had their annual examinations approaching shortly, the women set up a small library with around 200 books. It began as a little carton library with three boxes of books being brought in every day, the books spread across the premises, inviting the

youngsters to pick up and read. Then it came to have a more permanent nature with the books not being packed up in the evening. A brainchild of noted author Mridula Koshy, the library, beginning at 2 pm, functioned for three hours every day. In the first hour, textbooks were made available for students to study. Around the same time, a drawing competition went on for an hour for the younger ones. From 3 pm onwards, books of fantasy and other books of children's interest were made available. There were reading sessions organised for them, and many were encouraged to read aloud as in classrooms. Every afternoon, Hauz Rani resembled more of a teaching or an art workshop with children sitting on mattresses by the side of a softboard, drawing, scribbling or simply reading.

By evening, they went back home, leaving the space clear for their mothers to make themselves heard on the divisive new law. Hundreds of women joined them, resisting all attempts at muzzling dissent or uprooting the peaceful protestors. Like in other places, here too, there were plenty of placards against CAA–NPR–NRC trilogy; also plenty of photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar, Maulana Azad, Bhagat Singh, and hardly any of Jawaharlal Nehru. It seemed a deliberate ploy to stay clear of any possible criticism of the protest being driven by a particular political party. Also, it was an attempt to belatedly acknowledge the contribution of both Azad and Singh, who have been ignored by successive governments for decades.

With such niceties, and against all odds, in the heart of South Delhi, Hauz Rani made space for debate, dialogue and dissent with the government. They did it all without any star campaigner or a politician's involvement. It was a shining example of civil society showing the way.



Messages on the wall in Brijpuri Puliya-Mustafabad protest talk of unity and democracy even after the site was reduced to ashes in North East Delhi violence.

Mustafabad–Chand Bagh–Jafrabad

Mustafabad is not the most amiable of places. Shaista Rafiq though discovered her true calling here. For well over a month, she had been coming here to join other women in a peaceful but prolonged fight against the new laws and policies of the government. Till January-end, she used to teach at a primary school in Gokulpuri in the vicinity, then one day as she sat in the anti-CAA protest, something snapped inside. ‘I realised I was teaching to earn some extra money for the family. But what if tomorrow, we are left with no family, no husband and kids, no house, no bank balance, and packed off to a detention centre simply because there is a paper missing from my documents or there is a discrepancy in spelling of names? The choice was simple: Work today, keep saving and prepare to go to a detention centre a couple of years later or chuck the job now, raise your

voice today, get these discriminatory laws overturned, and live as equal citizens of the country. I gave up my job.'

Shaista is not alone. At Chand Bagh, Mustafabad and Jafrabad, there have been other women protestors who gave up their careers to concentrate on the fight for equal citizenship of the country. From early January, the three North East Delhi sit-ins of Mustafabad, Jafrabad and Chand Bagh had continued uninterrupted, though largely ignored by the media. The women, however, did not complain. Yusra, who too gave up a job of a counter salesperson at a textile showroom in Shahdara to join the protestors at Jafrabad, says, 'It's nothing special. It's a sensible thing to do in today's times. As it is, people are losing jobs due to the poor condition of the economy. I chucked mine and decided to help the women in Jafrabad design their protest in a systematic manner. I understand a law cannot be repealed without a prolonged fight. So, I have been telling other protestors that we have to dig in, we have to fight on. It's not like a rally at Ramlila Maidan where you come in the morning and go back home in the evening. Some political leaders have alleged that the men have forced women to lead the protest, that it is an unfair burden on them. I just want to tell them, women are not cattle. They can decide for themselves. Thank you very much.'

As protests spread far and wide, more and more women discovered their voice, be it in Kardampuri or Chand Bagh, Seelampur or Jafrabad. Emboldened by their new formed unity, the women at Jafrabad moved from the side pathway to the main road leading to the Jafrabad metro station. As more women joined on 23 February, a spectre of a new, big Shaheen Bagh replica loomed large. Around the same time, BJP leader Kapil Mishra, who lost in the Vidhan Sabha elections earlier in the month, called for an assembly of pro-CAA protestors, the term itself an anomaly. The men first gathered at Chand Bagh near the protesting women. They raised slogans against the protestors, including the oft-repeated 'Desh ke gaddaro ko...' Mishra did not address the followers, but moved to Kabir Nagar-Kardampuri locality in Maujpur, a little more than two kilometres down the line. It was here that Mishra gave an allegedly provocative speech against those protesting against the CAA, and gave Delhi Police an ultimatum of three days to remove the protestors. In a fiery address, he is said to have raised slogans even as his followers cheered him on. Less than an hour after

he left the area, an incident of stone pelting was reported from Maujpur. It was to be the mere tip of the iceberg.

Something similar happened at Chand Bagh where the anti-CAA protestors and those in favour pelted stones at each other. Soon, vast stretches of North East Delhi were in flames, scores of houses and business establishments set on fire, nineteen mosques and a dargah damaged or burnt, and more than fifty people killed. Within forty-eight hours of the first report of violence, Guru Tegh Bahadur Hospital near Dilshad Garden had received 189 patients affected by communal violence, the figure crossed 220 by the third day. More than seventy per cent cases were of bullet injuries. While twenty-five patients were declared dead on arrival, nine died at the hospital. Rest were discharged after prompt treatment and sent home—a home of the bereaved. Like the wife of Mohsin. She got married in this winter of much discontent. Her husband was killed before the city could bask in spring. Or the four-month pregnant wife of Shahid. She survived the mob rage, Shahid did not. Her child will never know the warmth of a father's love, born orphan as he will be. Or take the case of twenty-two-year-old Ashfaq Husain, a resident of Mustafabad. He got married on 14 February 2020. He was returning home after attending to a professional call on 25 February when he was felled by three bullets; he breathed his last hours later.

For the next few days, North East Delhi of February 2020 reminded many of the November-1984 Delhi when anti-Sikh pogrom struck the city. Incidentally, most pockets of violence were the ones that had heard provocative slogans made by political leaders during the Delhi Vidhan Sabha election campaign.

The Telegraph noted:

The violence in Delhi has largely been concentrated in areas that the BJP managed to win in the recent Assembly elections on the back of a vicious and polarising campaign led by Union home minister Amit Shah. Five of the eight seats the BJP won in the 70-member Assembly fall in northeast Delhi where rioting took place. The Delhi Northeast seat is represented in the Lok Sabha by the BJP's state president, Manoj Tiwari.

‘The communal polarisation in these areas had worsened in the run-up to the election as several BJP leaders had delivered hate speeches. The seeds of hatred were sown then and it was waiting to erupt. The provocative statements by BJP

leader Kapil Mishra on Sunday only stirred the communal pot already simmering for nearly a month,' a retired Delhi police commissioner told.²

Indeed. The women protestors who had refused to budge in the face of constant taunts and threats were finally uprooted after grave violence, loss of life, limb and property. At Mustafabad, where they had been sitting in protest near Farooqia Jama Masjid in a lane running parallel to an open drain, their site was burned down. Two days after the protestors were uprooted on 25 February 2020, all that remained by way of evidence were anti-CAA slogans painted on a pillar and a wall, and two photographs of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar that had escaped the conflagration. The women themselves though remained unharmed.

Writing in *The Indian Express*, three days after violence had broken out in North East Delhi on 23 February evening, Pratap Bhanu Mehta said:

India is descending into a night of dread and despair. The ongoing riots in Delhi are not a tactical aberration, some absent-minded lapse of attention. They have been in the making for a while, and represent the future that our ruling classes, with our aid and support, have imagined for us. The idea is to carpet bomb the Indian republic as we know it, and replace it with a regime that thrives on cruelty, fear, division and violence. Even as the politics of revenge starts, it is important not to forget the dynamics that led up to this moment.

As was clear from the start, the purpose of the CAA was not to solve the problem of non-Muslim refugees from our neighbouring states. That objective could have been achieved by a bill that did not discriminate on the basis of religion and did not align religious identity with the prospects of citizenship. The assurances of delinking the NRC, CAA and NPR processes were never credibly made. The result was a civic cruelty of the worst kind, where millions of ordinary Indians, especially Muslims, were made uncertain about what this process meant for them. The spectre of camps is too hard to ignore....³

Mehta, who has never been pusillanimous about taking a stand on emerging issues, went on to claim that the Shaheen Bagh protest was allowed to continue to consolidate majoritarian sentiment. He linked it to the BJP's campaign to Delhi Legislative Assembly elections, writing:

The BJP's poisonous campaign during the Delhi election was a classic Catch 22. First, we discriminate. Then we make sure there is no institutional redress.

If there is protest, we use it as further proof of the perfidy of minorities, intellectuals and other so-called anti-nationals. BJP leaders then call for violence to be unleashed, and when violence is unleashed, we blame them for violence. Never has a more diabolical moral circle been created....

Meanwhile, so much of civil society resembles a scene of moral desolation. The casual legitimisation of violence against minorities and the inversion of all moral values is at an unprecedented level. People cheer as 'Jai Shri Ram' has moved from being a call to piety to almost a call for killing.... The national anthem is sung while brutal assaults take place, mosques nonchalantly 'conquered'. And we are back to a barbarism where crowds threaten to strip you to ascertain if you have a right to any civic standing. The purpose is to strip us of all the decencies of ordinary humanity; the only thing that matters will be the identity that can be inscribed on your body.⁴

The anti-CAA protestors were made of sterner stuff than imagined even by rioters. As the police first requested, then virtually coerced women out of protest sites in Jafrabad, Chand Bagh and even Seelampur, the women were only temporarily displaced. Rather than going back home, they travelled a few extra kilometres and joined their sisters protesting at Shastri Park in east Delhi. Some had relatives in Old Delhi. Forced to leave their homes in North East Delhi due to security reasons, the women huddled up together at Lal Kuan, not far from Chawri Bazar metro station in the walled city, and continued to raise their voice against the discriminatory laws. Within seventy-two hours of the violence, they were back at Seelampur too. Here the women who sat near the Jafrabad metro station continued the protest. By 26 February, Wednesday, nearly 300 women were back with full vigour.

They knew from the beginning that it was going to be a long haul. They were fighting for their identity, their very existence. The macabre spectre of untamed violence for almost seventy-two hours told them of the odds stacked up against them. They continued regardless, knowing that in the war for equality the violence was but a minor battle they had been forced to confront. Neither scared, nor indignant, Shaista responded, 'Women in Shaheen Bagh had been protesting peacefully since 15 December 2019. We had been protesting peacefully for forty days when violence struck. Obviously, those who cannot talk or negotiate take resort to blood and murder. We learnt in school that violence is the last resort of the

incompetent. Our opponents are not just incompetent, they are vile and divisive.’

Notes

1. Dayal, J. and Bose, A. *For Reasons of State: Delhi Under Emergency*. 1977. New Delhi: Penguin, chapter one.
2. Siddiqui, I.A. ‘Delhi Violence: A Curious Pattern Emerges’. *The Telegraph*, New Delhi, 27 February. Available at: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/delhi-violence-a-curious-pattern-emerges/cid/1749010> (accessed on 20 April 2020).
3. Mehta, P.B. ‘The Delhi Darkness: Our Rulers want an India that Thrives on Cruelty, Fear, Division, Violence’. 2020. *The Indian Express*, 29 February. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/delhi-violence-riots-police-cao-npr-6288323/> (accessed on 20 April 2020).
4. Ibid.

Shaheen Baghs Everywhere



A million Shaheen bagh: Graffiti on the wall in Delhi says it all.

The best thing about Shaheen Bagh has been, well, it has spawned dozens of Shaheen Baghs across the country. Girls and young women have started emerging from the shadows of men, from the confines of domesticity to take their place as equal citizens in a pluralist democracy. There were many instances in the past decades when college girls took part in many a public protest, they held candle marches, raised slogans, sat in a dharna and gave powerful speeches. But once they finished college, they either slipped into jobs which did not help keep the embers burning for long, or settled for matrimony with its consequent responsibilities of home and children. Somewhere down the line, unannounced, they seemed to have lost their public space, their rights to make themselves heard on an issue of social or national importance. Slowly, they began to fade out of public marches and protests. True, there were many women who bucked the trend,

but even among them, many were career activists. Only a handful were regular career women, even less when homemakers and full-time mothers.

It all changed with Shaheen Bagh. The women of the forgotten South Delhi colony caught the world's attention with their relentlessly non-violent protest against the new laws. Slowly, the purpose of the protest went much beyond repealing CAA and other laws. It seemed the women were beginning to express their pent-up frustration with a sociopolitical system that often left them mute witnesses to their fate. For long they had seen the men being diminished by their opponents, and a system that was slow to react. For too long they had been confined to homes in the name of safety. For long they had been denied their voice in the name of dignity. Now, with the men themselves not being safe from brutal attacks visiting the minorities and Dalits post-2014, the women decided things could no longer go on this way. It had to change. In order to bring about the change, first and foremost, the women changed themselves, sacrificed the comforts of home, braved the chill of North Indian winters, learned to ignore taunts and answer critics. They raised their voice for the Constitution of the land. They read out the Preamble. And suddenly the adhesive qualities of our national symbols were rediscovered.

After just about a month of protest, the Shaheen Bagh women were emulated across dozens of cities and towns. If the action of Shaheen Bagh women took many by surprise, the decision of women from much smaller towns of Moradabad, Rampur, Kota, Muzaffarpur, etc., left the society bewildered. Suddenly, the women who were never given their due, never given credit for political wisdom, spoke up. And the nation had to listen. It had at least in part to do with the silent feminisation of education that had been taking place in the country since Independence. The expression and resilience of these young women were an outcome of an investment in education, both religious and secular. While the university graduates were expectedly belligerent, it was the voice raised by burqa-clad women that was the heart-warming feature. Speaking in favour of the Constitution, they spoke out against the new laws being discriminatory. When pressed about what brought them to protest, they had a similar response, 'We believe in our Constitution [they usually called it *ain* or *samvidhan*, Urdu and Hindi for Constitution, respectively]. It does not discriminate on the basis of religion. The new law does. Also, we protest because we want justice. We

know Allah is Adil (one who does justice). He loves those who do justice. If we do not speak up today for justice, there will not be justice tomorrow.'

All along they braved the police lathis, possible detentions, arrests and slander. But they never equivocated, did not flinch in the face of adversity, and fought on for an egalitarian India where all communities will have an equal stake. 'If Shaheen Bagh women can do it for so long for the nation, we too can', was their belief to egg each other on. Beginning second week of January, protests were mounted at places like Kolkata, Patna, Gaya, Darbhanga, Allahabad (Prayagraj), Lucknow, Kanpur, Aligarh, Rampur, Moradabad, Bhopal, Kota, Hyderabad and Mumbai. On Martyrs' Day of the Father of the Nation, women across cities in various protest locations paid respect to the Mahatma by singing the national anthem together at 5.17 pm, the time he was assassinated by Nathuram Godse.

Women were no longer ready for the fate of the nation to be decided by men. Destiny beckoned. Their challenges were many. On one side, they had to fight the patriarchal forces. Often, they were stopped by their parents or husbands from coming out to join the protest. On the other side, once at the protest site, they had to tackle the unwanted male gaze. All that, however, proved to be a minor irritant in the face of a State ready or amenable to the idea of a peaceful sit-in. Often, the police acted as the long arm of the State, raining blows on even candlelight marches, switching off the lights at night, confiscating rugs, blankets and eatables, filing FIRs, etc. Yet, the women remained undaunted, resuming their protest after every such attack, determined more than ever to usher in a new dawn.

Lucknow

The first day (17 January) women in Lucknow staged a sit-in against CAA, they made headlines. Their energetic protest replete with songs and slogans sent out a message of hope to all. The visuals of hundreds of women sitting at the famous Clock Tower warmed the cockles of many a heart. It seemed the Shaheen Bagh protest had had its first prominent off-shoot. Lucknow was relatively central, and as the capital of Uttar Pradesh, it had its own

significance. The city is known for its niceties, its finesses, its subtleties. During the First War of Independence, it had given the nation Begum Hazrat Mahal. A photocopy of the Begum's painting had often been pinned on the board at various protests across Delhi.

Lucknow had no such debts to clear. And the women of the city got down in earnest to speak out against the new laws. They had space for Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. That's all. No harking back to revolutionary freedom fighters or those involved in the First War of Independence, no Bahadur Shah Zafar, Tantia Tope or Begum Hazrat Mahal. The accent was on the now. Though the protests were yet again led by Muslim women, they had more than a smattering of support from other communities. So much so, the Clock Tower witnessed a havan, besides a reading from the scriptures of other religions as also a daily reading of the Preamble to the Constitution. The number of protestors too rose to a few thousand every evening.

Most protestors were middle-class women, some hailed from the economically enfeebled sections. Much like Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, the Lucknow protest was a protest by faceless women with no political ideology. Their only concern was protecting the basic structure of the Constitution, and they believed the CAA fiddled with it. A couple of days after the protest began, there was no electricity after 9 pm at the protest site. Every evening, six prominent street lights around the protest site were switched off by the police around 9 pm. At one time, even public toilets were closed. The women continued regardless of the obstacles. It is at this time that the State swung into action. The police banned protests, alleging the women had not taken any permission for the stir. One evening, around 9 pm, the rugs and blankets of women were confiscated, leaving them literally out in the cold. Even the eatables the women had brought along, biscuits, savouries, etc., to last the night were taken away by the police. Next, the area where they stood was filled with water, making it impossible for anybody to sit. The strong-arm tactics were on full display.

Also on display was the resilience of Lucknow women. They did not flinch or call off their protest. They remained steadfast, and continued with their protest. Aamna Ansari told, 'These odds will not send us running back to our home. Women do not leave their homes without a purpose. You will not find women doing nothing and gossiping at town squares. They come

out for a purpose. Now that we have stepped out, we are not going back till our goal is accomplished.’ The goal was collective, but the problems confronted by Lucknow women were uniquely specific.

The city has a number of Muslim leaders who owe allegiance to the ruling party; many enjoy offices of profit. The women of their families were allegedly seen trying to convince women to cancel their protest, thus trying to weaken the cause. The protestors ignored them and continued with their protest. On the night of 21 January, 160 women, including popular Urdu poet Munawwar Rana’s daughters Sumaiya and Fauzia, were booked by police for allegedly defying prohibitory orders in place.

India Today reported:

The police have identified and named 18 persons and lodged three criminal cases against protesters, mostly women, demonstrating against the new citizenship law in Lucknow’s old quarters. Among 18 booked are daughters of poet Munnawar Rana—Sumaiya Rana and Fauzia Rana.

In three separate FIRs lodged late on Monday night at the Thakurganj police station, around 150 people, including 130 unidentified, were booked under Sections 147 (rioting), 145 (joining or continuing in unlawful assembly knowing it has been commanded to disperse), 188 (disobedience to order duly promulgated by public servant) and 283 (danger or obstruction in public way) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

As per the complaint, the women had not only refused to disperse when a woman police personnel asked them to move out but also pushed her.

The protest against the CAA that started on the lines of the Shaheen Bagh protests in Delhi on Friday afternoon with barely 15 women has grown in size and now has more than 5,000 women in support. On Sunday, protesters at the Clock Tower had alleged that policemen took away their blankets.¹

The protestors, who had had FIRs filed against them, soon had the august company of former Governor of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh Aziz Qureshi, against whom too an FIR was filed for participating in a candle march organised against CAA–NRC on 2 February 2020. Again, the police alleged in the FIR registered at Gomti Nagar police station that the march was organised without the permission of the concerned authorities. The former governor was named as one of the leaders of the march in the complaint. Qureshi, who had gone to express solidarity with the women sitting in protest at the historic Clock Tower, stated, ‘Why is this law being

brought? This (CAA) is communal. This country does not need anything on the basis of religion. People here need employment. People here need justice against injustice.’²

Indeed, the Lucknow denizens needed justice. Every time the protestors tried to up the ante, there was the fear of a police crackdown. Any attempt to give the protest a facelift was met with even non-bailable FIRs, as noted activist Sadaf Jafar discovered to her chagrin. Incidentally, Sadaf Jafar was arrested while coming back after participating in a protest at Clock Tower on 20 December 2019 where she had made videos for online circulation. While under arrest, she was subjected to physical and verbal abuse by Uttar Pradesh Police. A couple of weeks after her release from jail in mid-January, she was still not able to eat normally, not able to sleep properly. Yet she continued undeterred by the setbacks and told the co-author Ziya Us Salam, ‘What is the alternative? We cannot sit at home and watch everything reduced to ruins. We have to speak up today because they want to silence everybody who does not agree with them. This is the second freedom struggle. Like during our freedom struggle, everybody did his bit his own way. There were numerous small movements within the movement. Likewise, the civil society movement is divided but united at the same time.’

Prayagraj (Allahabad)

The last time Allahabad made news was in October 2018 when the Uttar Pradesh government changed its name to Prayagraj. Debate and discussion succeeded the change of name. Then came the Kumbh Mela in 2019. Once the Kumbh passed off peacefully, Allahabad too receded from public memory. This January, Allahabad made a comeback of sorts to public mind. This time through its Mansoor Ali Park in Roshan Bagh where about a thousand women staged a night-long protest against the CAA. Beginning 11 January, the women assembled peacefully, reiterated their right to equal protection of the law.

Inspired by Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, the Allahabad women carved out their own little Shaheen Bagh. Accompanied by children, they defied convention to stay out at night. The protestors here were not only Muslim women. Sisters joined from all religions and raised a cry to repeal CAA. In fact, there was such a huge rush of women that the barricaded area, earmarked for some male protestors, too had to be opened to women. It was a role reversal of sorts where in a public sphere, a certain area is earmarked for women. Here, the area was pencilled in for men, and with the increase in women protestors, that area too was shrunk!

The women took no chances. They installed CCTV cameras at the site to avert any wrongdoing by any miscreant. With tea and sandwiches freely available, the protestors were never short of energy to raise slogans against the CAA. There were unconfirmed news reports of some women bringing placards against CAA written in their blood. Though supported by the Samajwadi Party and the Congress, the protestors made sure no political leader worth his or her name addressed them. The support, if any, was mainly infrastructural. However, some of the sheen was rubbed away when a woman protestor alleged that she was not only debarred from speaking at the protest but also beaten by a group of five to six volunteers. The police registered an FIR on her complaint, besides another against fifty unidentified protestors. The protestors continued with the stir, regardless of the allegations and FIRs. Women of all faiths expressed solidarity. Quoting Shabnam Gautam, who had travelled from Ghoorpur to Roshan Bagh for the protest, *National Herald* said,

‘Ruling party members are spreading the false propaganda that only Muslims are behind the stir. This is completely wrong. The truth is that not only Muslims but the Dalits and those from weaker sections of society would also become victims of this draconian law,’ she says passionately. The government’s move is aimed at depriving the minority community of their citizenship and driving them out of the country, she asserts. ‘Once this is accomplished the government would target Dalits and OBCs and withdraw their reservation which is why we have to stand united along with our Muslim brethren at this hour of crisis,’ she explains ... Arshiya Ahmad (25) left a lucrative job to join the movement, she claimed. ‘Hum yahan aa gaye hain to ab itni jaldi wapas nahi jaayenge jab tak ki is masley ka hal nahi hoga’ (Now that we are here, we are not going to go

back in a hurry, not till the issue gets resolved), she says defiantly while holding aloft a placard that read, ‘Ready to die, not ready to accept CAA and NRC’.³

Popular online news portal *NewsClick*, reporting on the protest held on 13 January 2020, also painted a positive picture of sorority and solidarity. It stated:

‘When men raise voices for their rights, the police puts them behind bars and prosecutes them, so we women have been forced to agitate to save our Constitution. If resilient women of New Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh, Kanpur, Gaya in Bihar can sit 24×7 in icy winds, why can’t we?’ Sara Ahmed, one of the key organisers of the protest told.... Another organizer, Tarannum Khan, told *NewsClick*, ‘At a time when women are constantly struggling in many places and fighting the government in this cold, how can we sit peacefully in Allahabad? It is a fight for our identity.’⁴

Indeed, in Allahabad, there was a sense of attack on the identity of women. Many felt they were more vulnerable than the men as they had married a man from another city or state and shifted with him consequent to marriage. They had no proof of residence of the city, say, some fifteen, twenty years ago. With the women being vulnerable, they felt their children’s future too was at stake as children were expected to show evidence of both their parents’ residence.

NewsClick quoted:

‘Our children’s future is at risk. We couldn’t sit at home, pretending everything’s fine. Laws are being framed to divide us in our own country. Women aged 80 years old and young children are all sitting in protest today. When we started the protest, there were only 40–45 women, but by night, the number had crossed thousand. Our protest is indefinite, and we will stand firmly against the government’s arbitrariness,’ said a 50-year-old homemaker, asking not to be named. Former Allahabad University Students’ Union (AUSU) president, Richa Singh, who was also present at the protest site, told *NewsClick*: ‘This time facing Modi government are not Muslims and Hindus but the women of this country. The CAA–NRC is not just anti-Hindu–Muslim, it is unconstitutional. The Constitution does not allow anyone to divide people on the basis of their religion. In a country where the names and addresses of people are wrongly written on voter ID and Aadhaar cards, the intention behind CAA raises several questions.’⁵

Against all odds, the Roshan Bagh protest continued from one week to another, from one month to another. The change of name of the city from Allahabad to Prayagraj had not affected the communal harmony of the locals. And the anti-CAA protests had given women a new confidence to step out, to speak up. It was no longer taboo for a woman to raise her voice in public. Soon women in Kanpur, Bareilly, Moradabad, Sambhal and Deoband began to speak up; many even shutting up the clerics in Deoband, the Islamic seat of learning.

Kolkata

The protests that began on 7 January made headlines a couple of weeks later when one of the protestors, fifty-seven-year-old Sameeda Khatoon breathed her last. It was the first known case of somebody sacrificing her life fighting the new laws. Like others, Park Circus protests in Kolkata were led by women. Initially, only a few dozen women came. Then the count began to increase. And within a week or so, Park Circus Maidan had begun to be called Kolkata's Shaheen Bagh. There were thousands and thousands of women, not just Muslim women, but women from all faiths. The burqas and bindis were seen in equal numbers. Of course, there were Muslim women too who used a bindi. You could not judge the protestors from their clothes. They ate together, slept at the same place, they raised slogans together, they sang resistance poetry together. In the face of steep odds, they remained unbowed.

Like in Shaheen Bagh, the women of Park Circus did multi-tasking with élan. Early morning, they would get breakfast ready for their children and husband. Once they would be gone, the women would come to Park Circus. The routine would be repeated in the afternoon when it was time for the kids to come back. Things would really come to life in the evening when the protest attracted the maximum crowd. Among the protestors were women from affluent families, many were from the poorer strata, most were young professionals or college students who would join the protest at the

end of a working day. With this heady mix started the Park Circus anti-CAA protest.

Taking inspiration from their sisters in Delhi, they joined hands, raised their voice against the CAA and a movement started. *The Telegraph* gave a low-down on the agitation which was once again led by first-time protestors who had initially gathered outside a mosque with nothing but hope in their mind.

‘When we started the agitation, we did not think beyond a few days. Especially because almost none of us had stepped out of home to join a protest before the citizenship issue erupted,’ said Noor Jahan Begum, a 50-year-old homemaker from Topsia, who has been at the protest venue since Day 1.⁶

When the women completed a month of their sit-in, they had many curious visitors. Many, in fact, joined them from that day. Most protestors were looking forward to 22 January, the day the Supreme Court took up a batch of petitions challenging the amended citizenship act. The Supreme Court refused to stay the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and decided that the court will set up a five-judge constitution bench to hear the 144 petitions filed against the contentious citizenship law. It also gave the Centre four weeks to reply to the petitions.

“‘The court order changed the way we thought. We realised there is no short-cut to end this struggle. We are now ready for the long haul,” said Amrin, a 27-year-old homemaker sitting beside Noor Jahan.’⁷

The women’s vehement protests against CAA took everybody by surprise. Even the government was caught unawares. Off the record, the ruling dispensation leaders admitted they were caught off guard. Illustrious author Arundhati Roy who went to Kolkata to deliver a keynote address at the Kolkata People’s Film Festival, said almost as much:

One of the most extraordinary things about these protests is that in the propaganda against Muslims, always portraying them as jihadi, terrorists and internal enemy, everything had to do with stigmatising the Muslim man. Suddenly, the women have come out and they still don’t know what to do.... The space that has been left for the ‘Muslim voice’ has always been a voice that suits this portrayal ... always some extremist Islamist, somebody speaking things that just feed into the hatred. Suddenly, you have these amazing young

women, articulate and brilliant, political, radical and they are not going to go back. When I say this, I don't mean that they are going to have to live on the streets always. But it's a moment of extreme empowerment and liberation ... especially for young Muslim women and I think it's just beautiful.⁸

Though Roy said it in Kolkata, copies of her statement were distributed freely in places like Patna, Bhopal and Lucknow. In Shaheen Bagh, an enlarged printout was stuck on the sidewalk near the protest site. Clearly, the women sitting in protest appreciated Roy's support who, incidentally, did take time out to visit the Shaheen Bagh women in Delhi, where she insisted she had come to learn from the brave women sitting out in the cold.

Meanwhile, in Kolkata, upcoming Hindi film actor Zeeshan Ayub asked the protestors not to be apologetic about their religious identity:

Muslims should stop being apologetic and justifying their rights. They should never consider themselves second-class citizens. They must realise that they have equal rights in this country ... My grandfather was a farmer. I never saw him. I don't know if he had participated in the freedom struggle. Does that mean I am any less Indian? No, it doesn't.⁹

As for the Kolkata protestors, the women continued regardless of the Supreme Court's decision to postpone the hearing by four weeks. Though many of them had fasted on the eve of the Supreme Court hearing, and some, like the Shaheen Bagh women, had written letters to the chief justice, they were happy to wait for, hopefully, a favourable outcome down the line. 'It is good. It gives us a chance to take our message to more people. We will not sit back and watch. We will convince more people to join us. We will get more support. We are not disheartened. We take it as an opportunity to spread the word about the discriminatory laws,' said the three protestors Ambareen, Shagufta and Ruqaiya, almost in union. When one of them paused for breath, the other two completed the sentence for her.

Such breathless energy! Such fearlessness!

However, that was not the best proof of their honesty of intent. It came a few days later when men and women in Plassey, in the Nadia district of West Bengal, inspired by the Park Circus women, decided to stage their twenty-four-hour protest. Nearly 200 men and women sat in protest to 'protect the Constitution' and protest against the CAA. 'There is a special

significance to this protest in Plassey. This is the battleground where virtually the whole of the subcontinent took a final stand against the British imperialism. This is our battleground now, a battle for existence,' a protestor told the media.

Bhopal

The Capital of Madhya Pradesh has been ruled by Begums. Yet, in an irony of sorts, women have been conspicuous by their absence from public space. Even Taj-ul-Masajid, built by the Begums of Bhopal has no dedicated space for women, the belief being that women will not leave the confines of their homes to come out in public to pray. It all changed on 1 January 2020 when the local women stepped out to protest against CAA. The protests started exactly a week after the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath led a 'Save the Constitution' march on 25 December 2019 and raised slogans against the CAA and the NRC. Nath and other marchers covered a distance of about two kilometres from Roshanpura Square to Minto Hall. The chief minister told the journalists:

The peace march that we have taken out is not just for Bhopal or the state, it is for the nation. We want to send this message from the heart of the country on how the central government is trying to disintegrate the country. The question is not about what is written in these laws. The question is about what the government is trying to hide about them. The question is not what they will be used for. The question is about how these laws will be misused.^{[10](#)}

With this positive signal emanating from the top, the Madhya Pradesh women started gathering for a protest of their own against the new laws. Beginning 1 January 2020, the women started a peaceful protest at Iqbal Maidan in Bhopal. Like at other places, here too women did a double shift of sorts. During daytime, they fulfilled their roles as mothers, wives, daughters or daughters-in-law. They cooked and cleaned at home, they sent their children to school, their husbands to office. In the evening, when their children would have completed their school work and the husbands would

be back from office, the women stepped out to go to Iqbal Maidan and oppose the discriminatory laws to the best of their lung power. For weeks on end, they kept the show going purely on the basis of their enthusiasm, their energy. They occupied the main space at the protest site; the men, who usually arrived much later, confined themselves to the wings. At night, the men stood guard to avoid any untoward incident. The maidan was left open to women!

Every evening, the women would arrive at the protest site a little after sunset with the dinner packed in a container. They would join other women who would have done likewise. From barely a couple of hundred women during the day, the numbers in the evening would rise to around a thousand. A favourite of the protestors here is the cry of 'Hallabol, hallabol'. Even though the women raised slogans against the central government, the police looked on peacefully, even amicably, totally removed from what would be happening in the neighbouring Uttar Pradesh where the policemen were quick to register complaints against protestors, confiscate their belongings and arrest them. The Bhopal women faced no such problems with a favourably inclined state government.

Like at most places, here too the initiative was taken by Muslim women. Again, like at most protest sites, women of all faiths joined in. The most poignant moment came a day before the Supreme Court hearing of petitions against CAA on 22 January 2019. The Bhopal women decided to organise a day-long fast. Accordingly, women were told to stay the night at the protest site where arrangements were made for sehri, the pre-dawn meal before starting the fast. The Hindu women joined in the fast too. They skipped sehri, but had a non-cereal meal around dawn, then stayed without food and water throughout the day with their Muslim sisters. They broke their fast together at iftar, coinciding with the sunset.

Though there was no danger of police excesses in Bhopal, the women faced a challenge uniquely their own. It was caused by a shortage of funds. The protestors had practically no funds, they even brought their own food with them. Hence, they could not afford to invite any celebrity, artist, writer or actor worth recalling. They managed with local speakers, mainly youngsters. When some students of Jamia and Aishe Ghosh of JNU Students' Union addressed the audience, the crowd increased significantly, pointing to the dire need for more identifiable names for the protestors.

What they lacked in celebrity quotient, they made up with piety. Each morning, there was a prayer at Iqbal Maidan; the men did it collectively, the women individually. Either way, they all prayed for repealing the new discriminatory laws. When, finally, they were told that upcoming Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan was going to address them, the protestors' enthusiasm was difficult to curb. Many protestors, otherwise professional teachers, decided to take a day off from work, others went from door to door inviting more women to listen to him!

If the Bhopal protest came about as an inspiration from Shaheen Bagh, it soon became a source of inspiration by itself. Ashta, located around eighty kilometres from Bhopal, started a daily protest of its own from 15 January. From morning to midnight, men and women sat in protest. There was a neat division of labour here. The women packed off the children for school, prepared lunch for the family and headed to protest after that. They sat there till sunset raising slogans against CAA–NPR–NRC, waved the tricolour, sang patriotic songs. After sunset, the men arrived at the site, the women went home. The men took on the responsibility to raise the pitch against divisive laws. In the biting cold, they stuck it out daily till almost midnight, at times even beyond. Once a week the men and women fasted and broke their fast with a community iftar, knowing they would have to stick together in this fight. At the protest were farm owners, agricultural labourers, their spouses and families. There were Muslims, some Hindus and Sikhs too, the underlying message being, if CAA hits the Muslims today, it will strike others soon. The best moment for the protestors came when Aziz Qureshi, former Governor of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, visited them. For the locals it sent a message: people, from top to bottom, from a governor to a landless labourer, were concerned with the new laws. Hence, the need to protest.

Patna

It started on 15 December, the time Jamia Millia Islamia was rocked with violence, also the time the stir began at Shaheen Bagh. On that fateful day,

some cops were injured and many shops were set on fire by a mob that turned violent while taking out a procession against the CAA in Patna. Over the next forty days or so, the anti-CAA protests had spread to eleven districts across Bihar. Places like Begusarai, Champaran, Darbhanga, Gaya, Nalanda, Gopalganj, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Kishanganj, Bettiah and Katihar reported protests. Mercifully, the violence of the first day was never repeated by the protestors anywhere, though intermittent incidents of violence were reported. Notably, there was a clash on 31 January 2020 between students going for immersion of Goddess Saraswati's idols and the anti-CAA protestors. At least two cars were reportedly burnt and several other vehicles damaged.

The violence though was reported from processions, whether idol immersion's clash with anti-CAA protestors or the initial anti-CAA rally. In sit-ins, there was no violence, nobody was injured, no shop was looted, no vehicle burnt. Everywhere, young women led the way, the older ones lent them support, children kept them company. The protests continued relentlessly, peacefully. At places, girls from AMU and Jamia Millia Islamia led the way. Interestingly, they had to go back as the universities had been closed following violence on their campus. The students could be sent away from the campus, but could not be denied their right to protest, as the girls proved so aptly in Bettiah.

The Hindu reported: 'Protestors, mostly women and girls, can be seen waving national flag, singing patriotic songs and reciting poems at dharnas in parks and open areas. In Patna alone, such protests are being held at three places for the past several days.'

The paper quoted, "'We will not move from here till this law is withdrawn by the Modi government even if it takes months or years', says a veiled Akbari Khatun, who has been coming to the protest site every day for the last 17 days.'^{[11](#)}

Unlike other anti-CAA protests, the sit-in in Bihar attracted a number of politicians with the likes of Tejasvi Yadav, Brinda Karat and Shivanand Tiwari being seen at the protests. However, the locals insisted that they did not make political speeches. 'Leaders are welcome to lend us support but no party flags are allowed', said Mohammed Sarfaraz, who had been sitting in protest at Patna's Sabzi Bagh. In fact, Sabzi Bagh became the talk of many

anti-CAA conversations with people expecting a little revolution to come through the protest.

Phulwari Sharif and Mangal Talab too reported goodly crowds with hundreds of women and children sitting round the clock to protest against the discriminatory laws. They raised slogans against the government. Like Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, Sabzi Bagh too was witness to touching sights of women cradling their babies even as they sat in protest. Again, like their Delhi counterparts, they could lecture any political scientist about the pitfalls of CAA for hours on end.

Then in Gaya's Shanti Bagh, there were heart-warming scenes of communal amity with women of different faiths taking a leaf out of Shaheen Bagh to sing nazms of Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Habib Jalib.

The Times of India reported: 'Poonam Kumari, advocate, and Rajeshwari Devi, a homemaker and mother of five children, are regulars at the protest venue. While Poonam is angry that the Constitution is being "turned upside down", Rajeshwari's worry is that she does not have any documents to prove her nationality.'¹²

Interspersing their patriotic songs with resistance poetry, the women pledged to fight on, one day at a time. Starting on 29 December 2019, like in Delhi, the women organised a relay protest of sorts. The women who came in the morning left in the afternoon when a fresh batch arrived. The afternoon batch left late in the evening, leaving the field clear for young men who slept out in the cold at night. The fact that women took turns to stay out late in the cold meant the bonhomie was never challenged, and nobody was burdened with more than she could bear.

Popular Urdu daily *Siasat* reported:

On a cold January afternoon, Dulari Devi and Shaziya Perween, sit under the open sky, singing national songs and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poems. In between, they also join slogans raised by others at the sit-in protest against CAA-NRC, turning the site into a mini Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, where a sit-in protest, mainly by women, has been going on for over 25 days.

The protest in Shanti Bagh in Gaya, where hundreds of people, mainly women and students, have gathered, has been going on 24×7 since December 29 but has hardly drawn any media attention so far. But undeterred, the sit-in protest is continuing with the overwhelming support of the common people in

Gaya town, widely known as the holy land where Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment.

The protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) at Shanti Bagh is the only of its kind in Bihar, and entered the 14th day on Saturday. As the name Shanti Bagh (Peace Garden) suggests, the protestors have been talking peace, following a peaceful path of protest and sending have been sending messages of social harmony to strengthen idea of Mahatma Gandhi's India, that is inclusive.¹³

Incidentally, the Gaya protest was visited by popular leader Kanhaiya Kumar. Urging the protestors to banish fear from their mind, he reminded them that the Constitution guaranteed them the right to say no. 'Non-cooperation was a valid democratic tool and it has to be exercised during the enumeration of the NPR. NPR was just a ploy as once the NPR was finalised, NRC can be prepared by just clicking the mouse,' he said.¹⁴ The fight goes on.

Ahmedabad

The peaceful non-violent satyagraha against the CAA should ideally have begun from the land of Mahatma Gandhi. Unfortunately, it did not. But soon the locals proved that they had not forgotten the Father of the Nation or the tools he used to bring down the mightiest empire of the time to its knees. They decided to walk in his footsteps in his land. Following the example of Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, protestors began raising their voice against the CAA–NPR–NRC trilogy in Ahmedabad's Old City in mid-January. On the first day, more men than women gathered at Ajit Mill in Shaheri Garib Awas Yojana, a state government housing scheme with predominantly Muslim residents.

Like at other places, the initial response was slow. Soon the protest grew with word of mouth and not just retired senior citizens but even working women, housewives and children sat in protest. Here, even children read their poetry, young men and women were given an opportunity to express their opinion on the CAA, and so on, thereby helping in keeping the flame

burning through the next generation. The protest, again like most other places, came alive every evening when the protestors sang patriotic songs, pledged not to show any documents for NPR, widely regarded to be a gateway to NRC. Every evening they concluded with the national anthem, reinforcing the unity of all. When the country slept, the Ahmedabad women sang the national anthem before retiring for the day. Accordingly, they began each fresh day with ‘Sare jahan se achcha’, Iqbal’s ode to the land.

They were also more focussed on the local problems in collecting or showing documents. Some pointed out to the Gujarat pogrom in which nearly a thousand people died and hundreds of houses were burnt.

The Wire quoted one such woman:

Ruksana Sheikh, a 53-year-old protestor, was holding a placard that said ‘My documents were burned in 2002 riots, *ab kagaz kahan se laaye* (where do we get our papers from). She told *IE*, ‘I studied till Class 7, my parents are dead and the only documents I have are Aadhaar card and voter’s ID card. There’s no birth certificate or school-leaving certificate. How am I supposed to prove my citizenship when they come for NRC and NPR exercise?’^{[15](#)}

‘They followed the Delhi pattern. They set up their own shamiana (tent). There were different stalls. There were photographs of our freedom fighters and a biggish cut-out of Dr. Ambedkar. There was no politician’s active involvement. It was peaceful, orderly and energising’, recalled Prof. Chaman Lal, renowned author and an authority on Bhagat Singh. He too had visited the site in early February and came back suitably impressed.

The Ahmedabad protest, which attracted women of all faiths, however, stood out not just for the goodly crowd that it attracted every evening, but for the bonds of solidarity the protestors established with those in other states. They came down hard on Yogi Adityanath’s repression of peaceful protests in Uttar Pradesh. The speakers took no time in reminding him that they were protesting in Gujarat, the home state of the prime minister, but had not faced any obstruction from the state police.

Similarly, they were angry with the allegations that the Delhi women had raised a slogan for ‘Jinnahwali azadi’. Taking a printout of Alt News rebuttal of the allegation, the women waved copies of it at the protest, and

insisted they wanted not ‘Jinnahwali azadi but jeene ki azadi’ (Not the freedom sought by Jinnah but the freedom to live).

That is not all. They went down history lane and expressed solidarity with the victims of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, Gujarat violence of 2002, Sabarmati train victims of the same year and all victims of ‘State-sponsored violence on tribal communities, killings of Kalburgi, Pansare, Dabholkar, Gauri Lankesh and all other activists and reformers.’ If ever a statement was made about the unity of the oppressed, the exploited, the deprived and the dispossessed, it was this! Interestingly, the women sat on a slightly raised platform, the men sat a little below, on the floor.

The protestors expressed pride that they could make themselves heard with a peaceful protest in Mahatma Gandhi’s state. Fittingly, the protest attracted many students from local universities and adjoining educational institutes, as also many seasoned Gandhians and civil society activists. They saw in the protest a ray of hope for a better India.

Jaipur

Today nobody can recall any occasion when hundreds and thousands of Indians gathered at one place for months on end with the sole purpose of reiterating their faith in the Indian Constitution, then peacefully and gracefully leaving the premises. But this is the landmark contribution of the women of Shaheen Bagh who started reading out the Preamble every evening at the protest site from 15 December 2019. Within days, noted activist Shabnam Hashmi organised similar reading sessions at India Gate and Nizamuddin in Delhi. Shortly, National Alliance against CAA did likewise at Jantar Mantar. Soon the practice was taken up by anti-CAA protestors in many places across the country. Leading the way was the iconic Albert Hall Museum in Jaipur. The museum became a site for regular Preamble reading from 2 January 2020. Attracting a goodly crowd, it soon caught the media’s attention. *The Hindu* reported that the museum has become

a venue for two-hour anti-CAA protest every day. Braving chilly winds, women and children have been joining the protest every evening since January 2. Their agitation concludes with a reading of the Preamble to the Constitution in the presence of Indian and foreign tourists visiting the 130-year-old museum.¹⁶

The museum in turn inspired hundreds of women who thronged the Shaheed Smarak on MI Road in Jaipur and formed a Shaheen Bagh of their own. National anthem, national flags, tricolour balloons, all were seen regularly at the round-the-clock protest that began on 31 January. Organised by a body dedicated to protecting the Constitution, once again, the women marginalised the men. *The Hindu* wrote:

Held under the banner of Samvidhan Evum Loktantra Bachao Abhiyan, the protest in Jaipur has drawn the participants from the Walled City neighbourhoods as well as the posh residential colonies. Two young girls, Nishat Fatima and Hadiya, dressed in the national tricolour, were the centre of attraction at the venue.... Though the representatives of various groups have been coming to extend their support to protesters, women have taken the lead in managing the affairs at the venue, situated just outside the Police Commissioner's office ... The participants have devised creative ways of protest every day and rendered poems, songs and slogans on different themes to make the agitation attractive. The protesters celebrated birthday of Guru Ravidas, the mystic poet-saint of the Bhakti movement, at the venue on Sunday [9 February].¹⁷

Earlier, *The Times of India* had commented on 3 February 2020:

The anti-CAA protest in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, which enters the 50th day on Monday, has well and truly caught the nation's imagination with many such sites springing up across the country. Over the last two days, the Shaheed Smarak on MI Road has turned into Pink City's Shaheen Bagh. Over 200 women have been holding non-stop protests in the third round-the-clock sit-in protests in the state ... From a six-month-old toddler to 80-year-old granny, participants listened to fiery speeches, raised slogans and sang poetry while keeping the momentum going. Hijab-clad Zulekha Abid, 19, from Jalupura came with her extended family, including eight women, and is attending a protest for the first time. After spending an hour, she gathered courage and requested the organisers to address the crowd. She spoke for about 5–6 minutes, fumbled several times, but received a thunderous applause for her story of how

discussions at home shifted from daily chores to detention centres, losing the citizenship rights and mounting atrocities by the police.^{[18](#)}

Just as Delhi's Shaheen Bagh paved the way for smaller baghs elsewhere, the Jaipur protest had its offshoots in Sikar, Kota, Chittorgarh, Bundi, Sawai Madhopur, among others. Interestingly, as a compliment to Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, the protestors in small towns were advised not to call themselves Shaheen Baghs!

Bengaluru

The protest at Bilal Bagh opposite Hazrat-e-Bilal Masjid had been going on since the first week of February. Women and children had been staging a peaceful sit-in, pledging allegiance to our Constitution, remembering Mahatma Gandhi. They criticised the CAA, NPR and NRC. They sang Rahat Indori's 'Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai' (India does not belong to any one person). The men stayed out, much like ball boys in a cricket match. They supplied the women food and water, newspapers and medicines. All this was done in such a low-profile manner that even residents of Bengaluru who never frequented the Tannery Road remained untouched by the protest.

Then one evening, veteran film actor Naseeruddin Shah addressed the protestors. And not just Bengaluru but the nation sat up and took notice. Shah spoke from his heart. He emphasised the fact that the entire anti-CAA movement was led by women, something the Uttar Pradesh Government had difficulty in coming to terms with—the chief minister had accused the men of hiding behind women. Shah read out a poem by Safdar Hashmi, drawing a parallel with Roop Kanwar's sati. Kanwar was an eighteen-year-old widow who was immolated in Sikar in 1987, a day following her husband's death.

Then there was Member of Gujarat Legislative Assembly Jignesh Mevani who too expressed solidarity with the women. The presence of such personalities not only emboldened the women but helped in taking the message far and wide. Shortly, people noted that the Bengaluru protest was

replete with interesting parallels. The women here considered the new laws worthy of a dustbin. And the locals named their Tannery Road protest after its Delhi cousin—Bilal Bagh!

Writing in *Punjab Today*, noted writer Amandeep Sandhu confessed to losing his sleep after visiting the protest. He wrote in his inimitable way:

Those women sitting stoic in their chairs, the children full of energy at even middle of the night. The speakers starting and ending with slogans. A young man carrying a carton in his arms, wading between chairs, collecting wrappers, tissues and used newspaper pages and empty bottles, making a cheerful game out of disposing dry waste to the refrain of ‘NPR bhi kachra’, ‘NRC bhi kachra’, ‘CAA bhi kachra’.^{[19](#)}

So touched was Sandhu with the protest following Mahatma Gandhi’s mantra of ahimsa and satyagraha that he concluded his piece by appealing to the readers to visit Bilal Bagh, Bengaluru’s very own Shaheen Bagh:

Bangaloreans, it is my request and appeal: go visit Bilal Bagh.

In solidarity, in bonding, in affection, in love.

If each of us goes there for one hour once, we can do wonders in how we understand ourselves.

Please go... Amplify Bilal Bagh’s voice. Let it ring out loud and clear. So we can ALL sleep easy.

The fight for peaceful sleep, equality before the law goes on.

Chennai

The protests in Tamil Nadu had been brewing ever since anti-CAA protestors were put down with a heavy hand in Delhi in December 2019. Within days of Shaheen Bagh taking root, there were much smaller spontaneous protests in places like Trichy, Coimbatore, Tirunavelli and Salem. Ignored by the media, they were to remain unacknowledged local voices against the new law. Then in Chennai, women came out to protest towards the end of January at Washermanpet. They were however not

allowed to hold a round-the-clock protest. Advised to protest only during working hours, the women left the place completely. They reasoned that nothing was to be gained by protesting for a few hours. ‘A drastic law needs a drastic and dedicated response’, argued Yasmin, a hijab-clad woman into her fifties.

Just a week later, the women came back to the same place. This time they were in much larger numbers and they sat on the road and lanes around the place. The men helped them from a distance, the women sat down, raised slogans against the CAA. For once, using Hindi or even Urdu was not a problem. Again, the local cops hit them hard. They allegedly used their batons freely and generously. The ladies took the blows, but continued to protest vehemently. They refused to be cowed down.

As Yasmin told the authors, ‘What have we done? We did not disturb any traffic or cause problems to the public. We only asked that our Minister D. Jayakumar to come and meet us. Still they came and beat us. Why? This is a jannayak state (democracy). Do we not have the right to protest peacefully? In the afternoon, the women police constables beat us. In the evening the men beat us. They hit us on the chest, dragged us out and dropped us far-off. We did not even have money to come back.’

The police, however, denied any lathi-charge, a contention dismissed by the women protestors. ‘We will endure the beatings but we will not back down until the CAA–NRC is rolled back’, Yasmin shot back on behalf of the women.

The Wire reported:

‘We were very inspired by what is happening in Shaheen Bagh. If they can fight so hard, why can’t we?’

Her son is in class V and his exams are scheduled for Monday, but that’s the least of Shamitha’s concerns now. On an ordinary day, she might have been fretting over it, but today was no ordinary day, Shamitha has no idea how long the abnormal state of affairs would last.

‘Let them declare that the Act has been withdrawn and you will not see a single soul here’, she told *The Wire*. Until then, she added, the streets would be ‘full’ of protestors. Shamitha is among a few thousand woman [sic] sitting on the narrow streets of Washermanpet, a locality in North Chennai, protesting the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019. The women clearly outnumber

men at this protest, as everywhere else in the country at the moment, and appear more determined. It was their decision to hit the streets.

When the women occupied the streets on Friday evening after offering their prayers, the backlash was immediate. The Chennai police allegedly lathi-charged them and abused them in vulgar terms, the women said.... The women of Washermanpet, now dubbed 'Chennai's Shaheen Bagh', remain undeterred however. 'The police did try to intimidate us on Friday but CAA and NRC are even more intimidating to our existence here', a bunch of them said. 'We will not disburse until we know for sure that the Act will be withdrawn, come what may.'²⁰

Soon news came in that more and more women had stepped out to protest not just in cities and towns but even in villages. 'It is a completely leaderless, faceless movement with one common goal: no CAA, no NRC, no NPR', said Jan Mohammad, a Chennai-based Jamaat-e-Islami functionary.

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Countering Propaganda



The women silenced the critics with a banner announcing that the protestors do not accept cash or money transfer.

he success of Shaheen Bagh women's stir surprised everybody. The Muslim community was pleasantly surprised to get support from unexpected quarters. It was considered normal for men to step out to protest, for college-going youngsters to take part in a march or sit in a dharna. But to have women of the community who have probably never taken part in a stir of any sort was not just beyond comprehension but simply incredible. The moral fibre of the women gave a fillip to the anti-CAA–NPR movement beyond measure. So much so that as women proved difficult to dislodge, and more patient than most men, it left the authorities in a dilemma about how to unseat the protestors from the Shaheen Bagh road that linked Delhi with Noida. The protestors were all peaceful. They mouthed nationalistic slogans. They frequently sang patriotic songs, and some of them drew the tricolour on placards. They seemed beyond temptation, and in their simple ways, beyond any political ambition.

Initially, the detractors tried the time-tested tactics of alleging that the Congress was behind the prolonged protest. Nehru though was nowhere to be seen. The protestors had been smart enough to use the photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Bhagat Singh, even Ashafaquallah, but there was no sign of Jawaharlal Nehru, the most preferred punching bag of the ruling party. However, the absence of any Congress leader of substance at the protest site failed to give currency to the allegation. Yes, Shashi Tharoor did go there after being invited by Jamia Millia Islamia students to address them in their protest against CAA—Shaheen Bagh is just around two kilometres from where the Jamia students sat in protest—but he failed to find many takers among the audience. Also, the efforts of local Congress leaders to get into the protests were smartly stonewalled by the women. They came, they stood, they wanted to speak from the stage. Their request was declined.

It left the detractors of the Shaheen Bagh protest flummoxed. Then came the tactic which is the easiest to use against any opponent. The BJP's IT Cell in-charge Amit Malviya tweeted that the women in Shaheen Bagh sat in dharna in return for ₹500 and biryani. The spokesmen of the party lost no time in catching on to the allegation. Soon, a section of the media, often indistinguishable from the spokesperson of the government, started running tickers on Shaheen Bagh women charging ₹500 a day for sitting in protest. Then came prime time talks and debates. Suddenly, this mudslinging and character assassination seemed to be working. The common man was inclined

to believe this constant bombardment about the pecuniary benefits the women allegedly derived by sitting in the dharna at Shaheen Bagh.

It is then that the women who had by then been sitting on a completely non-violent protest, using the symbols of India to draw attention to the cause, decided to hit back. First came the banners in and around the protest site that the women in dharna had no bank accounts, no PayTM, nothing where a person could transfer money. The banners, in Hindi and English, hung strategically around the place, also declared that no cash would be welcomed. The women were not done though. They spoke out to the media personnel who came to visit the place after the allegations cropped up. Then in a typical manner of smart women, they threw a challenge to those making unfounded allegations against them: ‘Send your wife or sister here. We will pay her ₹5,000. But will she be able to take the bone-chilling cold of Delhi in January?’ Many were at pains to explain they were from well-off families. In conversation with the authors, one claimed she was a teacher in a local school and came to the protest site because she believed in the cause. Another told us that her sons earned many times more in a day than the sum quoted. ‘We have air-conditioner, television, washing machine and everything at home. Why would we sit here unless we were upset with something? Certainly not for ₹500–700. Come to my house, my daughter-in-law makes the best biryani. We will serve you,’ she said, adding, ‘Even in making an allegation, there has to be some decency, some standard. This is the pits.’

Not content with asking the men to send any woman incognito to find out for herself, two women decided to put it on record for posterity. Their integrity was being questioned, and they were not going to hold back. They sent a defamation notice to Malviya for the unproven allegation. ‘Shaheen Bagh women send defamation notice to BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya over paid protest charge’, reported *India Today*.

Miffed by the allegation of being paid to sit on protest, the women at Shaheen Bagh have sent a defamation notice to BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya. The legal notice has demanded an apology and ₹1 crore in damages from the BJP leader ... The protestors are angry over a viral video shared by Malviya, which claimed that the women, who were protesting against the CAA, were paid ₹500 per day.¹

Two protestors, Nafisa Bano and Shahzad Fatma sent the notice through advocate Mahmood Pracha. Not holding their punches, the women retorted to

Malviya:

‘By making and propagating false allegations against the protestors and casting aspersions on their motivations, you the addressee, and other entities, have not only played a fraud on the general public but have also attempted to bring disrepute to the protestors who are bringing attention of a large number of people on the issues being pressed by this extraordinary exercise of Constitutional freedom.’

‘A video has been posted by you on social media site Twitter, which has been played across several media platforms, had alleged that the protestors are taking ₹500-700 in order to be a part of the protests. Such statements are not only false but also have an effect of defaming the protestors in the national and international community,’ the legal notice said.²

They claimed that Malviya’s action was an offence under Section 500 of the Indian Penal Code (punishment for defamation). Bano and Fatma reminded Malviya:

You are a member of the BJP, the ruling party at the Centre, and therefore have a vested interest in defaming this mass of protestors. You are engaging in a campaign of attacking the integrity of protestors by spreading lies against them so as to divert the attention of the public and the wider media from the truth which the protestors are speaking about the BJP and its anti-Constitution agenda. That because all forms of coercion, inducement and other pressure tactics have failed to placate the protestors for several weeks, and as the protestors have themselves taken all measures to keep the demonstration peaceful and without incident, the state authorities and other interested entities have failed in their designs to have the area vacated. Therefore, you, an affiliate of the BJP, have started to defame the protestors instead to fulfil the objective of the state authorities in an underhanded manner.

The notice failed to draw any response from Malviya or the party spokesmen. The women continued with their protest, happy that they had called the opponents’ lie. ‘We are happy, but not complacent. Next, they will say we have been propped up by Imran Khan’ (Pakistan’s Prime Minister). Right on cue, some foot soldiers of the opponents started an online campaign to allege how Pakistan was funding the Shaheen Bagh protest. It came photographs of Khan handing over a plate of food somewhere. It was juxtaposed with a picture of Shaheen Bagh women sitting down for their lunch. The

photographs too were proved to be misleading. Ah! The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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Barbs and Bullets all the Way

The peaceful protestors of Shaheen Bagh lived dangerously. A night spent peacefully was considered God's mercy; a day that passed without a fresh indignity being hurled at them from some quarter was like a blessing. For many, just the visuals of women having tea or biryani were enough to cast aspersions on their motives! And to think these were the women fighting for the idea of India, an India that enshrined its vision in its Constitution where the Preamble declared, 'We the people of India solemnly resolve to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic'. The constant targeting of women practising Mahatma Gandhi's tools of ahimsa and satyagraha spoke ill of a society and polity's attitude towards people who did not necessarily agree with the decisions of the government, and believed in using democratic forms of peaceful protest to express their opinion. Instead of being lauded for keeping their counsel, and not getting provoked into a violent action, they were called, believe it or not, 'rapists and murderers' during the election campaign to Delhi Vidhan Sabha, as reported by many media outlets, including *India Today*.¹ The men who heaped such insults were from the BJP, the party leading the ruling dispensation at the Centre; also the party behind the passing of the CAA, which the protestors across the country asked to be repealed.

Forever the recipient of vitriol, the women had to bear the indignity of the home minister asking the voters to 'press the button so hard that current is felt in Shaheen Bagh'.² His party colleague Parvesh Verma claimed that 'the Shaheen Bagh protestors rape and kill your sisters and daughters'. At an election rally for Delhi Vidhan Sabha, Verma, son of former Delhi Chief Minister Sahib Singh, said: The people of Delhi know that the fire that was set in Kashmir a few years ago, and the mothers and sisters of Kashmiri Pandits were raped, that fire then was set in UP, in Hyderabad, in Kerala. Today that fire has been set in a corner of Delhi (Shaheen Bagh). Lakhs of people are collecting there. That fire could reach the houses of Delhi at any

time; it could reach our houses. The people of Delhi need to think through their decision. These people will enter your houses, they will pick up your sisters and daughters, rape them and kill them. Today, there is time. Tomorrow Modi ji will not come to save you; tomorrow Amit Shah will not come to save you. Today there is time.³

His party colleague and Union Minister Anurag Thakur went a step further in expletives. He exhorted the audience who had come to listen to him in Delhi, by giving them the first half of a slogan, 'Desh ke gaddaro ko...'. He paused, letting the audience finish it for him, 'Goli maron s...o ko'. When the audience's voice was not loud enough, he encouraged them to be louder still. They faithfully upped the tempo.

Kapil Baisla, a resident of Kondli in east Delhi, apparently took his word too seriously. On 1 February, he set out for Shaheen Bagh with a pistol. He fired two rounds in the air, nobody was injured before he was nabbed by the police. While being taken into custody, he shouted Jai Shri Ram and blurted out, 'Hamare desh mein aur kisi ki nahin chalegi, sirf Hindu ki chalegi' (Nobody but the Hindus shall rule the country). He raised slogans for Hindu Rashtra too. His words bore an eerie similarity to senior BJP leader L.K. Advani's slogan during the tension-ridden days of Babri Masjid–Ramjanambhoomi stir, when he repeated, 'Jo Hindu hitt ki baat karega, wohi desh par raj karega' (He who speaks in favour of Hindu interest shall rule the country).

The Shaheen Bagh women were flustered for a few minutes. Particularly, the children were scared by the sight and sound of bullets being fired in the vicinity. Within minutes though the women were back to singing patriotic songs at the protest site, and renewed their pledge to fight for the Constitution of the land, a fight that even M.K. Raina, himself displaced from Kashmir in 1990, acknowledged, gave a sense of belonging to everybody. They kept a distance from the dirty politics that followed Kapil Baisla's arrest. It was revealed by Rajesh Deo, DCP, Crime, Delhi Police that Kapil had obtained the pistol seven years ago. It was also claimed that he had joined the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in 2019, with the police alleging that they had recovered photographs from his mobile phone in which he was seen with Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi Manish Sisodia and Rajya Sabha Member Sanjay Singh. Even as AAP denied the allegation, and Chief

Minister Arvind Kejriwal insisted that if Kapil Baisla was indeed an AAP supporter, the punishment should be doubled. The Election Commission of India issued a warning to Rajesh Deo and directed that he not be assigned any work related to the assembly elections in the capital. Action was taken against the officer because Deo had on 4 February revealed to the media details of an ‘investigation which has political connotations’.

The Wire reported:

The officer had disclosed to the media that the man caught for firing three shots in the air at Shaheen Bagh had been identified as Kapil Gujjar nee Baisala and that data retrieved from his deleted WhatsApp account revealed pictures in which he was shown to be a member of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

The DCP had stated that Baisala and his father joined the AAP in early 2019, a claim that was denied by the family of the accused.⁴

The challenges for the Shaheen Bagh protestors were far from over. Around the time Kapil Baisla was firing in the air, the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath was alleging that Kejriwal liked to feed the protestors at Shaheen Bagh biryani. Earlier he had alleged that men were hiding behind the women in Shaheen Bagh-kind of protests in Lucknow. As popular magazine *Outlook* reported:

These people do not have the courage to participate in the protests themselves. They started making the women sit at roads. The children have been made to sit. It's such a big crime that the men are sleeping under the quilt and the women are made to sit at roads. It is shameful.⁵

In one statement he mocked women's right to free thinking, speech and action, besides of course calling into question the character of men!

The trial, however, was not about to come to an end. It seemed beyond the comprehension of the larger society how women could hold a protest for fifty days, and not say a word in anger. There was plenty of insinuation, some innuendo thrown in too. Then a woman, who later claimed to be a political analyst running a YouTube channel called ‘Right Narrative’, entered the protest site. She was clad in a burqa and was probably looking for some incident showing the protestors in a negative light, which she could later play on social media. She was nabbed by the protestors and

handed over to the police. Within no time, a video went viral wherein she was identified as Gunja Kapoor, whose Twitter handle has 24,000 followers, among them being Prime Minister Narendra Modi and upcoming BJP leader Tejasvi Surya. In the video the women, led by one Upasna Sharma, can be seen asking her, ‘Did you embrace Islam?’

When the woman replied in the negative, the protestors said, ‘You deceived us. You hid your identity.’

When Kapoor claimed she had donned a burqa because she had been to other anti-CAA protests in Jamia and found that she had a different viewpoint, Sharma countered her, ‘I am Upasna Sharma. Nobody doubted me. I come here every day. If your channel had not covered anything about the protests till now, what brought you here? Nothing major happened today.’ She was allegedly frisked and the protestors found a camera with her. Kapoor, who initially claimed she was from Lucknow, was asked to show visuals of the protests there on her mobile. On being unable to prove anything in defence, she was handed over to the police. The *NDTV* reported:

A burqa-clad woman was whisked away this morning by police at Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh—the heart of protests against Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA—after her presence at the site of round-the-clock sit-in raised suspicion.

The woman—identified as Gunja Kapoor—raised suspicion when she kept asking ‘too many questions’, said eyewitnesses. Some protesters insisted on frisking her and found a camera. This led to a commotion and she was caught by several women. Later, police came to the protest site and took her away.⁶

Kapoor sent away, the women resumed their protest. No questions asked of anybody’s origin or religion. No doubts expressed about anybody’s intentions or integrity. The women kept their cool again. Remaining totally unflustered by a barrage of expletives and maybe even spies, they responded with flowers and songs of unity. Soon enough, they organised Jashn-e-Ekta, ‘a multi-faith ceremony of mantras, hymns, kirtans and qirat’. ‘Together, we will take a pledge for peace for our motherland,’ the women declared.

Notes

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A Rival Protest Next Door

On the fiftieth day of Shaheen Bagh protest, another protest started barely 200 metres from the protest site. It was a balmy Sunday morning with the gentle warmth of the sun. The protest was in favour of CAA and almost exclusively populated by men. In stark contrast to the inclusive nature of Shaheen Bagh protest, where the women answered venom with love, even bullets with a human chain and national anthem, here anger and threats of violence loomed large. Vociferous and vituperative, the men screamed, ‘Desh ke gaddaro ko, goli maro...’. To them, a person who opposed the CAA was a traitor who deserved to be shot, not a democrat expressing his opinion peacefully, persuasively, even poignantly. None of them had probably walked down to Shaheen Bagh protest site barely a few metres down the line.

Clearly inspired by the election campaign slogan of Union minister Anurag Thakur, they seemed to be carrying forward his rifle-with-violence agenda. Far from being apologetic for two consecutive attempts at scaring or even attempting to kill the peaceful protestors by Kapil Baisla in Shaheen Bagh and Rambhakt Gopal Sharma in Jamia—Sharma had threatened to kill those sitting in protest and ended up injuring one student—they seemed to want more of the same. Hence the hateful slogan, ‘Desh ke gaddaro ko...’. It was an expression of a constricted and bigoted mindset under which there was no scope for dialogue or debate, leave alone dissent. For them, there was only one way of being an Indian, and that was to be a follower of each and every action of the government. Loudly pushing the agenda of one nation, one ruler, they saw in Shaheen Bagh not an embodiment of Mahatma Gandhi’s principles of ahimsa and satyagraha, but an extension of the ‘tukde tukde gang’ (a gang that wants to divide the country)—a pejorative term for those opposed to strong arm tactics of the ruling dispensation, and exercising their right to free speech.

Importantly, the pro-CAA protestors close to Shaheen Bagh did carry the national flag but it did not seem sufficient for them. They added to it saffron

flags and trishuls. The message was unmissable: even when they respected the tricolour, they did not forget to bring along divisive symbols. Initially claiming to be local businessmen living in the vicinity, they inadvertently revealed that the protest was organised by Bajrang Akhara Samiti. The protestors backed their tridents with slogans of Jai Sri Ram. Ostensibly, trying to get the road cleared for traffic from Faridabad and Noida, they were confused at various levels. Were they worshippers of Ram out in a religious procession? Could not be, as Ram is not known to have used the trishul. Or were they Shiv bhakts? Or were they patriots who felt the need to help out with the smooth flow of traffic on a much-used road of Delhi? Or were they only interested in the police shifting the protestors from the current site to the popular protest site Jantar Mantar, as one of them claimed? It left many an onlooker wondering, what did the trishuls have to do with opening a road blocked to vehicular traffic since 15 December 2019? In this case, the road in question being the one connecting Delhi's Mathura Road with the satellite township of Noida, where only some school buses and ambulances have been allowed? Certainly, it was not a pilgrimage they were heading for. The protestors were just about peaceful, their raised fists, abuse-laden slogans, hate-driven speeches and anger-filled faces told a different story. In essence, they were there for optics on a weekend, some Sunday protestors soaking in sun with friends and likeminded men who were soon dispersed by the police. It was a far cry from the brave women of Shaheen Bagh who gritted it out in temperatures of 2 degree Celsius and endlessly talked of inclusion, adhesion, love and sharing.

The protest, attributed to the Hindu Sena by some of the participants, did prove that the nation was on tenterhooks between the largely peaceful anti-CAA protestors and the often-angry pro-CAA men and women. Observer Research Foundation said as much online:

Provocation from a rightwing outfit on Sunday, February 2, at Shaheen Bagh holding a pro-CAA demonstration and asking the police to evacuate the anti-CAA protesters has not demoralised the agitators. The pro-CAA protests by members of the Hindu Sena came a day after a 25-year-old man, Kapil Gujjar, had fired shots at Shaheen Bagh chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' and saying 'Hamare Desh men aur kisi ki nahin chalegi, sirf Hindu ki chalegi (Only Hindus shall have a say in our country, no one else), resulting in panic in the area.... On

Saturday, another right-wing group-Dev Sena-had given a call to hold pro-CAA protests and had promised to get the Shaheen Bagh cleared from anti-CAA agitators. But they had later released a press statement stating that they were withdrawing the call due to appeals of Delhi Police for peace.¹

Only some of the Shaheen Bagh protestors could hear the hateful slogans of the pro-CAA crowd. However, the word travelled. It caused a minor commotion. But soon the women shot back, ‘Let them try. It is election time. They will do anything to remove us. But we are not here for a personal cause. We have people of all faiths here. They cannot turn it into a Hindu–Muslim issue.’ Soon enough, the women gave a fresh interpretation to Gandhian advice of showing the other cheek. Confronted with abuses and more abuses, the women responded with flowers. Even as three women stood with small plates of rose petals near the entrance point closest to the pro-CAA protest, others sang, ‘Is desh ke jawano par, phool barsao saaro par’. The fight went on. With love. It prompted a Facebook user to make a page recommending Shaheen Bagh women for Nobel Peace Prize. Far-fetched, but the message of the brave women, like the bird after which their colony was named, had travelled.

Notes

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Legal Cases against the Protest

Less than a week before the Supreme Court was to hear petitions asking the Shaheen Bagh protestors to vacate the road, former Chief Information Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah and Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad moved the Supreme Court seeking impleadment in the case filed for removal of the protestors. Habibullah and Azad claimed that the Delhi administration had deliberately blocked other roads connecting Delhi with Noida and Faridabad ‘to create public inconvenience’.¹

In a joint application filed with Bahadur Abbas Naqvi, a Shaheen Bagh resident, they alleged there were two other roads that could be used for traffic movement after Road 13A was closed.

‘The applicants seek indulgence of this court to briefly bring to its notice some of the collusive acts of the administration, the home ministry as well as the state of Uttar Pradesh in blocking alternate roads that are far away from Shaheen Bagh to deliberately cause traffic jams for commuters between Delhi, Noida and Faridabad,’ the application, filed through Mansoor Ali, said.

Referring to the plea seeking removal of protesters, they said the petition was filed in collusion with the central government which controls the police in Delhi. They said since the alternative routes were blocked by forces under the Centre, they apprehended that the real facts would not be placed and the court may be misled into passing orders that could be misused by the government.²

After the petition of Habibullah and Azad, *NDTV* carried out a study of the roads in question. It found heavy traffic blockades on both sides of the road. Its findings were interesting:

NDTV attempted to tackle the blockade from both sides, in Noida and in Delhi’s Sarita Vihar. There are five blockades around a protest that covers only a 150-metre stretch on a single carriageway connecting Noida and Delhi. Our first encounter with barricades was well inside Noida. Roads were closed on the flyover at a point that was two kilometres from the protest site. Apart from

cutting off Shaheen Bagh for traffic, this blockade cuts off an important access road from Jamia, Kalindi Kunj and an alternate route to go to Faridabad—all of which have nothing to do with the Shaheen Bagh protest and are at a distance where traffic can be easily allowed.³

The channel decided to visit all the alternate routes to Shaheen Bagh—Sarita Vihar and on to Mathura Road, and found some unexpected support from the Shaheen Bagh Residents' Welfare Association. It discovered the protestors' claim that they gave open passage to ambulances and school buses was true. *NDTV* further said:

After crossing the DND flyway, Ashram and hitting the Mathura Road—a popular route connecting Noida and Delhi—we reached the GD Birla road on which the Shaheen Bagh protesters sit every day. Interestingly, on the Delhi side, the blockade is minimal—from the point of the blockade, the protest site is only 500–800 metres away. It is on this side of the barricade where Kapil Gujjar fired shots in the air as he attempted to approach the protestors. Policemen stationed here said unless there's an emergency, no vehicles would be allowed through. Ambulances, school vans and fire engines are exceptions. The protestors allege that the excessive barricades are not an administrative but a political decision—to demonise the protest—by the Delhi Police, which reports to the Union Home Ministry led by Amit Shah.

'We have repeatedly suggested to the cops how to divert traffic for those who want to go to Faridabad. And for those who want to travel to Sarita Vihar and Mathura Road. There have been various discussions on opening one part of the GD Birla Road. But the police have always turned down all these requests,' Saleem, a member of the Shaheen Bagh Resident's Welfare Association told. 'The design is pretty clear. They want to project us as the villains. They want people to think that we are responsible for the massive traffic diversions even though our protest is limited to this site. They want all commuters to curse us and hate us for raising our voice against CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and NRC (National Register for Citizens),' a protestor at Shaheen Bagh said.⁴

The protestor's apprehension proved well placed. Even before *NDTV* had accessed the alternate routes, a petition was filed by a BJP leader Nand Kishore Garg urging the Supreme Court to pass appropriate directions, as the protests at Shaheen Bagh were allegedly causing inconvenience to the common people because an arterial road connecting Delhi and Noida had been blocked. Incidentally, it was a contention that was denied by the

protestors who reiterated that all emergency services were available in the area. No school buses, ambulances, milk or vegetable vendors were stopped, they claimed.

The Supreme Court, hearing the case on 10 February, declined to immediately order the removal of the people protesting against the amended citizenship law. It did, however, signal that people could not be allowed to block a public road indefinitely. As the lawyer pleaded for an immediate opening of the road, Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul responded, 'If you can wait for 50 days, you can wait for one more week'. The court posted the matter for 17 February as the two-judge bench issued notices to the Centre, Delhi Government and Delhi Police.

The bench, which also comprised Justice K.M. Joseph, said it did not want to take a call on the two petitions that had reached them without hearing the government first. The petitions were filed by lawyer Amit Sahni and Delhi BJP leader Nand Kishore Garg.

Finally, on 17 February 2020, the Supreme Court appointed two mediators to talk to the protestors to find a solution to the vexed issue. *NDTV* reported:

Two senior lawyers have been chosen by the Supreme Court to talk to protestors who are on a sit-in for over two months in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA. Senior advocates Sanjay Hegde and Sadhana Ramachandran will meet the protestors and try to persuade them to continue their agitation in another location so that commuters are not hassled due to road diversions and blockades. Former chief information commissioner Wajahat Habibullah will help them in the task.⁵

It further added, "Right to protest is a fundamental right. What is the alternative area they can continue the protests without blocking the road?" the Supreme Court said. To this, the Delhi Police's lawyer replied, "They can choose a place".

The deliberations of Hegde and Ramachandran gave the women a chance to express their side of the story. Visibly impressed with some of the arguments, they were told by the women that there were indeed two alternate roads which were blocked by Uttar Pradesh Police and Delhi Police. The interlocutors submitted their findings to the court in the next hearing. The court then asked them to continue their talks with the

protestors to find an amicable solution aimed at opening the much-talked about road.

However, by March 2020, India, along with much of the world was caught in the pandemic of Covid-19. There were reports of people contracting the virus from different parts of the country, including Kerala, Maharashtra, Delhi, Telangana, etc. As the number of infections mounted, and death toll seemed to follow suit, the doctors advised people to maintain social distance and avoid physical interaction in their meeting. Trains and buses were cancelled. Schools and colleges were closed. The Shaheen Bagh women responded to medical advice by shifting from rugs on the floor to wooden beds, each bed accommodated one woman to maintain social distance. The protest went on. When the central government called for a fourteen-hour curfew on 22 March, the women went home, leaving behind their slippers, shoes and placards against the CAA in a symbolic protest. The Covid-19, however, showed no signs of abating and the government had no option but to ban all social and religious gatherings. Soon, a national lockdown for three weeks was announced by the Prime Minister. The Shaheen Bagh protest site too was demolished by the Delhi Police on 24 March 2020. No gunshots were fired. Nobody was injured. After 101 days of entirely peaceful Gandhian protest, the women retreated home. As did their counterparts in other places like Nizamuddin, Hauz Rani, Shastri Park, Jama Masjid, Turkman Gate and Inderlok in Delhi, followed by protestors in all other cities, barring Kolkata where they stayed in for a few more days. They all promised to come back once the grave danger presented by Covid-19 goes away. There are battles still to be fought.

Notes

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2. Ibid.
3. Upadhyay, S. 2020. 'Shaheen Bagh Protest Blockades Excessive and Deliberate? A Ground Report'. *NDTV*, New Delhi, 14 February. Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/shaheen-bagh-protest-blockades-excessive-and->

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4. Ibid.

5. Vaidyanathan, A. 'Supreme Court's Mediators to Talk to Shaheen Bagh Protesters on Shifting'. *NDTV*, New Delhi, 17 February. Available at: [https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/shaheen-bagh-supreme-court-appoints-top-lawyer-to-talk-to-protesters-about-shifting-says-blocking-pu-2181369?pfrom=home-topscroll](#) (accessed on 20 April 2020).

A Life-changing Stir



Artists found true expression at Shaheen Bagh. Here is a work on display right behind the stage. It shows a shaheen or falcon.

The systematic use of lies and half-truths to mislead the public; the open calls for shooting down dissenters, all of whom are labelled ‘traitors’, ‘anti-nationals’ and belonging to the ‘tukde-tukde gang’; the underlying assumption that ‘one leader’ and ‘one party’ alone represent the true voice of the ‘nation’; the unconcealed debunking of the Indian Constitution as only a recent and ephemeral document compared to the millennia-old Vedas; and the open attempt to reduce the largest religious minority of the country to the status of second class citizens through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act are all indicative of the ruling regime’s single-minded and uncompromising thrust towards a fascist State.¹



The women respected the call of the prime minister for janta curfew. Barring one protestor, they left behind their slippers in a symbolic protest.

A little under two months before Prabhat Patnaik, Professor Emeritus, Centre for Economic Studies, JNU, penned this analysis for *The Telegraph* in February 2020, the perspicacious women of Shaheen Bagh had understood the challenge that awaited the nation, and its largest minority.

They also understood that as women they were likely to suffer more in case the nation's slide towards 'one leader, one party' was not arrested. The CAA followed by NPR and NRC were congenitally linked attempts at browbeating all, with the minorities and the women being particularly vulnerable. Most institutions stood compromised, personnel in positions of authority were rewarded not for uprightness but pusillanimity. The judiciary obfuscated, the media, at least a large section of it, became a cheerleader. The opposition had been systematically silenced, the police forces looped in to the agenda for Hindutva Rashtra masquerading as Hindu Rashtra. The march was relentless and gathering momentum with a speed that would have thrilled had it not systematically endangered all that the nation stood for. It was at this grave hour that the unsung women of Shaheen Bagh left their homes to come out and raise an anguished cry for the soul of India. Like millions of women of all communities across the country, they were the most vulnerable to the trilogy of CAA–NPR–NRC. Many had married and shifted to Delhi from a smaller town in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Rajasthan. Some had got married even before they could get a voters' identity card made. At the new house, they found, everything was in the husband's name or that of the father-in-law, the ownership papers, the electricity bills, the gas and telephone bills, nothing had their name on it. Many had not been to school, only a few were graduates or post-graduates. In other words, their oft-repeated cry of 'kaagaz nahin dikhaenge' stemmed from the acute vulnerability of their status as also a determination not to let the authorities run over their rights to equal, unquestioned citizenship. In a country with more than 1.77 million homeless people, as the Census 2011 revealed, their pain reverberated across the country.

During the stir, for months on end, they reiterated their love and respect for the Constitution of India as manifest in the daily collective reading of the Preamble, and for the beloved tricolour—as evidenced by its placement atop a pole from where it was hoisted on the Republic Day, the cheeks of little girls where it was painted and head scarves of older women dyed in hues of saffron, white and green. India was theirs, and nobody could deprive them of all that the nation stood for, was their unequivocal message. In doing so, they, on the one hand, resisted the march of the fascist forces; on the other hand, they rewrote the rule book within the community, within the family. Each battle was important, each battle had to be fought and won.

And women were not going to be silenced. For long the society had mistaken their patience for subordination, their dignity for a state of perpetual debilitation. Not anymore.

Prof. Patnaik appreciated it partly when he wrote:

India's recent rush towards such a State has been halted only by the courageous resistance put up quite spontaneously by common people: women, marginalized groups, especially those belonging to the religious minority, the working people, students and members of the intelligentsia. This resistance is seeking to uphold the Constitution that embodies the concept of a free, secular, democratic and inclusive nation, which was the vision of the anti-colonial struggle and for which the Father of the Nation had laid down his life.

This resistance is virtually the last line of defence against the onslaught of fascism because all the institutions of the democratic State, which would normally be expected to defend it and upon whose defence the people repose their trust, have caved in with the advance of fascism.²

The women proved harder to break. They not only continued the protest even when the men who had encouraged them first to start a stir suggested they go home, they took on the State and the media's might with resolve and an uncanny knack for doing the right thing at the right time. When an unconfirmed word spread during the Delhi election campaign that the women protestors were in danger, the women toned down their campaign for a day or two before deciding to go ahead full throttle by inviting highly respected artists to perform at Shaheen Bagh. The message the protestors sent to the polity was: 'We are not alone, the movers and shakers are with us too'.

When a gunman was caught with a pistol in his pocket, the women calmly handed him to the police, no lynching, nothing, just playing by the rulebook. When another man fired in the air and raised slogans for a so-called Hindu Rashtra a couple of days later, the women refused to be cowed down. Again, they let the police do their work. They responded by forming a human chain holding hands for yards on end. The message: 'Nobody can divide us on the lines of religion. We are together.' When a pro-CAA rally raised vociferous and expletive-laden slogans, the Shaheen Bagh women responded with flowers. Every now and then, the women were faced with the prospect of police action. Every other day, a heavier deployment of

police personnel was seen. Every time this happened, the women mustered up greater numbers. Within minutes, the place would be teeming with protestors. In collectivity lay their strength. 'We will live and die together', the women were often heard telling others. Often faced with criticism for blocking an arterial road, the women calmly replied, 'We are giving birth to a new nation. It is hard labour. Please bear with us.' Yet, the same women happily moved the barricades to make way for a Hindu funeral procession, or when an ambulance had to pass.

Within weeks, a protest developed signs of a movement, a stir had become a call for social awakening. Of course, the women showed their political gravitas too. Confronted with endless sloganeering by a political party during Delhi elections, where they were called 'murderers', 'anti-nationals' and 'part of the tukde tukde gang', the women decided to keep their peace. The day the election results were announced, they kept a maun vrat, a silent fast. They tied a black ribbon across their face, and through their placards stated that they were not in favour of or against a political party. They stood for the Constitution of India. A couple of days later, they even came up with the resistance anthem, a song asking 'Modi, tum kab aaoge?' (When will you come, Modi?). On the eve of Valentine's Day, the women waited with a teddy bear for the prime minister or his representative to come and talk to them. As far as symbolics go, the Shaheen Bagh won all the battles.

Peace. Persistence. Political acumen. Poetry. The Shaheen Bagh women exhibited them with finesse. In doing so, they not only unleashed the forces of resistance against the march of fascism, they also sent out a message to men all around: the women were alive and awake.

Unsurprisingly, most men supported these new age women, conscious of their rights, aware of their responsibilities. When these women go home, there would be a possible realignment in domestic equations. Until now, in many families, the men decided whom the family would support at the time of elections, the women decided which television or mixer-grinder was to be bought. In the more traditional families, the patriarchal head even decided matters of matrimony. Without taking anybody into confidence, the eldest man would announce in a joint family: 'Maine zubaan de di hai' (I have given my word). Not just the candidate concerned, but everybody else fell in line. Whether this changes in the long run remains to be seen, but the

first breeze of change began to blow during the Delhi elections in February 2020 itself, when many more women voted for the AAP than the leading opposition in the Vidhan Sabha, the BJP, whose leader had often bad-mouthed the protestors. *The India Express* reported:

If there is one social demographic that played the most significant role in ensuring AAP's second consecutive landslide victory in Delhi, it is that of women.

Not only did women electors this time nearly match their male counterparts when it came to voting, falling short by just 0.07 percentage points, they also ended up voting overwhelmingly in favour of AAP, far more than men did, disproving the long-held belief that women vote on the advice of their husbands or other male members of their family. The gender divide in voting preferences in the 2020 Delhi elections is such that it could be argued that had women not voted in this election, the AAP victory wouldn't have been a landslide but a very narrow one.³

Amanatullah Khan, the AAP legislator in whose constituency Shaheen Bagh fell, won by the second largest margin, victorious by 71,827 votes surcharged with the support of the protestors.

Yet the women called the shots at the protest. Not once was Khan invited to speak from the dais, not even in the wake of his victory. The women knew they were fighting for the law of the land, and not against any political party. It was the same ability to think with a clear head that made sure the Muslim clerics were kept yards away from the protest. No Imam Bukhari, no dargah rector, nobody was allowed to come and address the doughty women. Gone was the obsequiousness of women, their attitude of unquestioned respect for imams and maulanas. The maulanas no longer decided for women, the women did it for themselves.

A small but not an insignificant spin-off for women was the opening of mosque portals for them. A mosque in the immediate vicinity of the protest site opened its doors to any women who might wish to offer individual prayer. A mosque, just a kilometre away, went one step further. It earmarked space for women to come and offer prayers, individually or collectively. For the women of Shaheen Bagh who had not known the mosques inside their lanes and bylanes, making space for them, it was a first. Many had gone to the mosque at the Jamaat-e-Islami headquarters in

Abul Fazl Enclave, but found no provisions elsewhere. For the first time, they asked for their right in the mosque, and had it granted too!

Much like one of the grannies at the protest site revealed. ‘My sons drive an autorickshaw. But now I insist their children, including daughters, study up to college. I look at these girls holding the microphone every day, and wonder, why cannot more girls do that! Soon, they will. Our coming out is a revolution by itself. We had not dreamt of this day. But now we have lost any sense of fear. We refuse to be segmented into compartments of religion. We realise the Hindu sisters sitting with us, the Sikh women who have come from Punjab, our struggle is the same. The days of making Muslims and Hindus fight each other are gone. I tell this to my sons too. They smile and agree.’

Also reduced is the dependence of women on men for travelling. Shabnam, a forty-three-year-old regular protestor, revealed to co-author Uzma Ausaf how she had gained confidence to even travel to Lucknow on her own. ‘Now, I go to see my son in Lucknow without anybody going with me. My parents are still uncomfortable with the idea, but I have lost that sense of fear. I am totally fearless now. I can find my way. I do not need a husband with me all the time.’

Indeed, beyond the immediate battle with the discriminatory and divisive laws, there is much that the women accomplished. They might have just given the nation the roadmap for a better, more inclusive and egalitarian tomorrow. As Patnaik wrote:

One can only applaud the courage and the commitment of those who have stood up so strongly in defence of democracy. Echoing the Turkish revolutionary poet, Nazim Hikmet, who in 1949 had written from prison, ‘The Armies of China saved me too’, one can say, ‘The women of Shaheen Bagh, Park Circus and Ghanta Ghar saved me too’.⁴

Notes

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About the Authors



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He has been associated with *The Hindu* for almost two decades and has been its features editor for North India editions for sixteen years. Currently, he is Associate Editor, *Frontline*, and writes on sociocultural issues for the magazine.

A prolific and an acclaimed author, in 2018, Ziya released *Of Saffron Flags and Skull Caps*, a take on the challenges to the idea of India, and *Till Talaq Do Us Part*, a study of various divorce options available in Islam. In 2019, he published *Lynch Files*, a take on victims of hate violence, and 365

Tales from Islam, a book that aims to introduce Islam to children. His book *Women in Masjid: A Quest for Justice* (2019) has been much talked about for women's rights in Islam. Ziya co-authored (with Dr M. Aslam Parvaiz) *Madrasas in the Age of Islamophobia* (2020). His most recent release is *Nikah Halala: Sleeping with a Stranger*.



UZMA AUSAF started her career as a journalist with the daily *The Times of India*, New Delhi, before joining *The Statesman*.

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